

Perception is Reality:
The Real Reasons Formative Assessment has not Thrived

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore three questions regarding formative assessment (FA) and Student-Involved assessment strategies among five middle years teachers in Saskatoon Public Schools. The questions were one, what were the beliefs of the teachers regarding formative assessment and student involved assessment? as well as two, what were their perceptions about attitudes of students, parents, and the community about these innovative assessment practices? and thirdly, what did the teachers believe would support teachers in taking up formative assessment and student-involved assessment? The five participating teachers had varying lengths of service ranging from five to over twenty-five years. Teachers were interviewed in a semi-structured style during one forty-five minute interview, each. Teachers were provided with sample prompts in order to facilitate the conversation.

Teachers reported using FA and student involved assessment strategies with mixed results. Teachers used strategies and modified them on occasion to suit the learning conditions, to allow for time constraints, or to accelerate the pace of instruction. Teachers also reported using FA and student-involved assessment strategies primarily in subject areas in which they felt most comfortable and relied on more traditional summative assessments in subject areas in which they were less comfortable.

Teachers stated there were varying degrees of support from colleagues, school based administrators, and school division consultants. The support generally disappeared if the school based administrator whose emphasis was FA and student-involved assessment left the school for a different assignment. Some participants reported taking initiative to pursue FA of their own accord, but were left to roll out the initiative on their own.

Teachers described mixed results with other stakeholders in these processes as well. Generally parents and students were less interested in FA and student-involved assessment and showed a preference for summative evaluations such as percentages and letter grades.

Implications of these findings are that teachers are not appropriately trained in student assessment and support for formative assessment is inconsistent. Students are often omitted from the unpacking of curricula, are not accountable for collection of their own assessment data and are not held responsible to act upon any formative assessment feedback in order to improve their learning. This study led to the following definition of formative assessment: formative assessment is the demonstration by students they can act upon descriptive feedback to show they have achieved a learning outcome regardless of mode (oral, written, performance, etc.).

Keywords: Assessment for Learning, professional development, formative assessment, student involved assessment, number grades, summative evaluation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past six years I have found myself challenged professionally to determine what constitutes sound educational practice in a middle school classroom. I have observed that formative assessment is one tool that has tremendous power to improve student learning. Formative assessment is simply a means to provide feedback to students regarding their learning episodes so they may make adjustments on future learning episodes. It is important to note it is critical for students to be engaged in the process and the students need to be fully invested in making the necessary adjustments to enhance their own learning and not merely make the products of their learning superficially attractive.

I teach within the Saskatoon Public School Division. I have been employed with the school division for the past twelve years. I have primarily been a grade eight teacher. Grade eight is the final year of elementary school within the Saskatoon Public School Division. This arrangement provides unique challenges and opportunities. I have a great opportunity to get to know my students because I teach them all day every day. It is challenging because I teach many subjects at a high level. The inevitable risk is in some subject areas, students may get the short shrift despite my best efforts. The greatest opportunity lies with the time I can spend with my students. I truly have a great chance to get to know my students, and I can tailor my program to suit their interests and abilities. Another benefit of this arrangement is the flexibility I have regarding planning and making changes based on feedback from students, parents and administration and my own observations. In other words, I can improve my teaching based on formative assessments from students, parents and administrators. In this I have a wonderful opportunity to ensure that the adaptive dimension of the Saskatchewan provincial curriculum is realized.

Despite the positive attributes of this teaching and learning arrangement, there are many challenges I face. The most obvious challenge is the sheer volume of material we are expected to cover within the grade eight curricula. During the school year I teach portions of, or complete courses in the following subject areas: language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, health education, physical education, music, drama, dance, visual arts, computer science, and implementing any other initiatives proposed by school based administration or the school board – one such example is character education. There are also programs that seem to create as many problems as they attempt to solve. “Read to Succeed” is a pull out program intended to provide remedial reading instruction for some students reading below grade level. The difficulty lies in the program structure. Students are pulled out of the classroom and teachers initially could not teach language arts, science, mathematics, or social studies. Planning constraints abounded with this arrangement. Despite the insistence that the core subject areas of language arts, mathematics, social studies and science are not to be taught it became inevitable that exceptions to this directive would occur. In my case it seemed as though it were a daily occurrence and this prevented natural subject integration from occurring.

One example of subject integration I use in my teaching repertoire combines English language arts, visual arts, mathematics, science and social studies. This unit also enables students to engage in a project based learning opportunity, that also affords them the ability to use computer technology to conduct research and to work on almost any part of the project they feel ready to tackle. Naturally, as I present this material to the students, we have lots of discussion about which phases must be dealt with first and which ones may be left until a suitable time arises.

The project has at its roots that when a population's women are healthy, the majority of the population is more likely to be healthy. The overview of the unit is that students enact the roles of citizens and government representatives from various countries at a "town meeting" forum. Citizens then address their local government representative with concerns about the status of women and girls in their country, bringing forward any potential solutions. With input from the citizens, the leaders then prioritize the concerns voiced at the meeting and decide on the most effective way to take action to improve the situation in each of the countries. The critical thinking and inquiry questions from the unit are:

- What does it take to make a population healthy?
- Why is women's health so important for everyone?
- What are the root causes of a population's poor health?
- Which solutions address the root causes of a population's poor health?

While the health of women is the central issue, we then use solar power to "take effective action to improve the situation in each of the countries" as noted above. As the unit is unfurled students are introduced to solar pop can heaters as the first hands-on project. Many examples of simple technologies that can improve people's lives exist on the Internet and a simple Google search will provide an abundance of examples. Once students have built these rudimentary heating devices and have obtained the necessary feedback based on field-testing, we next apply some physical geography and mathematics to use our latitude and basic geometry to determine the most effective angle relative to the sun to maximize the heater's output. A simple calculation of percent difference between the first set of outputs and the maximized outputs quantifies the proof of concept.

The next step is to take the heater project and to turn it into a solar cooker. Students might redesign what they have already made, based on the formative assessment provided, or they can begin from scratch, making any type of solar cooker that they consider feasible. Some enterprising students have even applied some of their knowledge of optics and used Fresnell lenses to amplify the sun's rays to make exceptionally hot solar cookers.

As a final task, students are challenged to create a solar still that will purify water from a nearby storm retention pond. Students are exposed to the flora and fauna of the pond during a microscopy unit. They obtain a sample of the pond water and survey the organisms contained in the collection vessel. They then use their expertise with solar devices and try to distill the water so it "purified." Purified is contained in quotation marks as we are not equipped to test the purity of the water. Rather, the students repeat the survey of flora and fauna contained in their distilled sample and make comparisons to their original sample of pond water.

While all of this building of solar devices on its own is an interesting exploration, the integrated lesson is enhanced by our attempt to solve the original problem: take effective action to improve the situation in a third world country. What we have found are many examples of third world cultures in which women are the primary caregivers at home, they are entrusted to do domestic chores, and may bear the burden of any or all, agricultural work. This would include cooking and heating a home which ties together the value of the solar pop can heaters. Students are encouraged to explore even more alternatives to solar cooking and are asked to compare an accepted practice such as cooking with charcoal with solar cookers. They then are challenged to determine how changing from the accepted practice to an alternative practice may be beneficial to women and the rest of the population.

Simple, right? On paper it is painfully simple. In practice with a focused group of kids it is simple to deliver. What is less straightforward is answering the question, “How are we going to be marked on this?” This is where the focus of my professional learning has led me into student involved assessment strategies. I spend considerable time at the start of the unit by sharing video, student examples, and discussing possibilities so that students can tell me what they think they should be assessed on. This is the essence of student-involved assessment. Students are afforded the opportunity to determine the product, process and assessment strategies. Students find it difficult however, when I tell them there will be no formal pencil and paper test. Rather the “test” will be for them to demonstrate and explain how their contraptions work, or at least prove the concept. In addition, they are to propose changes to their design, or the unit to make either one better.

The early discussion regarding student assessment ensures that students are intimately involved and aware of the assessment criteria. It ensures that I have a clear grasp of the curriculum objectives I am trying to cover. It also helps to ensure that parents and administrators are kept apprised of what we are doing in the classroom. This last piece is the accountability piece. It has become, in my experience, a necessary one to minimize confusion during the unit and especially after the unit when final marks are given to students. Final marks are calculated based on weighted rubrics. Most middle years students in our school division receive a term average in each of language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Students who have alternative or modified programming may not have a mark calculated, but will receive a progress report reflective of a personal program plan and may include no numerical grading.

The more my teaching practice evolves, the less I like assigning grades, scores or evaluations. I prefer to use ongoing formative assessments that help students to improve learning

and instill in them the notion that learning is not finite. Once we are “done” with a unit of study, it may be used later on. using a Fresnell lens to make a solar cooker and recalling the microscopy unit to determine if water has been purified are two examples. I have found it increasingly difficult to quantify how well a student has done with respect to the learning process when we are dealing with such a broad unit. I find it difficult to evaluate how a student learns to learn. To that end, checklists, rubrics, conversations and observations made during the unit of study are better indicators of what and how they are learning.

This approach to teaching and learning is by far the most interesting . It ensures there is little opportunity for down time and kids can enjoy or learn the benefits of autonomy. Not that this approach has been eagerly received. Over the past few years, my experience has been that students at my school were far less inclined to learn this way and parents preferred to see reams of paper coming home in worksheets. Really. I can honestly report that students asked me on more than one occasion to have worksheets instead of open-ended project based learning. When pressed for a reason, invariably they stated that worksheets were “easy” and that they “did not have to think.” In fact many of my colleagues and I have found students arrive at school day after day ill-equipped to deal with the expectation they participate in our open ended thinking and learning activities. For the first two months, we are teaching them how to prepare for project and inquiry based methods. The students have just not experienced this in their educational history. This creates a bigger challenge for us as teachers.

I found as time went by, I and some gifted colleagues were like square pegs in round holes. A cliché to be sure but that was the experience. We were at odds with students for a variety of reasons. Parents requested meetings with administrators regarding our practices. Students openly complained that this type of learning was too hard. It became our belief that the

students were conditioned to perform only while immersed in the world of worksheets. As for the meetings that were held without me present, the resulting comments from school-based administration could be distilled to stating that, “You are the problem” despite that my school division has focused on teacher professional development in assessment for learning for the last ten years.

My own cumulative experience was not the only one that has spurred me on in the formative assessment and student involved assessment world. Rather, several years ago, my daughter provided me with the drive to continue with my teaching strategies. I was working in the world of worksheets, teaching in the very fashion I now know to be deficient. Classroom management was a breeze, and there was little if any real learning in my classroom. What happened during this period in time with my daughter was that she told me one day after school she had had a bad day. I pressed her for some information and she stated that she had failed a math test and that, “When you fail a test you cannot go back and do it again.” This was from a grade three student.

Later that evening after snacks and some play time we talked about her test. She revealed some interesting facts about her experience. The first was that she really did not understand what she was being assessed on. She was working on a math program at grade level that has at its core communication and process rather than finding discrete numerical answers. She was unclear about which was more significant – a final answer or explaining her thinking. Secondly she was perplexed how and why the teacher had put a score on the test. She thought this was curious since her report cards have no quantifiable data on them. Finally, the statement she could not go back a revisit this test was heartbreaking . We went through the test together. We ignored the

score completely but created a checklist we made together. As she explained her reasoning of each response as she had written on the test, she was correct in every instance except one.

That was it. For whatever reason her teacher was at the time unable to get the same interpretation from the paper as my daughter could share with me in five minutes. There is no denying conferencing with each student, assuming there are twenty-five students, would take about two hours. Nonetheless conferences are warranted because of their ability to convey a greater understanding of student learning. This is not assigning blame to anyone. What this became for me was a great talking point for parent-teacher conferencing. It also reinforced in my child the notion you can go back to revisit a learning episode. It reinforced the values of project-based learning, curriculum integration and student involved assessment strategies. My classroom quickly became a hub of dysfunction as we re-entered the wonderful world of inquiry and left worksheets behind. I have become more determined to ensure that students do not have the negative experiences that my daughter had. It is imperative that we use the five minutes per day to conference with students throughout the day. As students engaged in meaningful project work I could become better informed as to their strengths and weaknesses, and in turn provide guidance for their learning as they need it.

These episodes all reinforce my research question. What do my colleagues really think about formative assessment and student involved assessment? In our world today, more kids are doing less and less for themselves. For a great example of this watch “Hyper Parents, Coddled Kids.” Many of the teachers I work with share the same opinion of assessment as me. It needs to be student centered, explicitly taught, and continuous. Some more traditional quantified evaluations also need to be included.

According to Fischer and King (1995) an authentic assessment is one that “examines students’ abilities to solve problems or perform tasks that closely resemble authentic situations” (p. 3). Authentic assessments are those learning activities that have utility for students beyond school. In this respect I have sought to find learning activities that help us avoid worksheets. I am still a believer in the notion that kids must get a certain amount of seatwork and that some drill and skill has merit. However, as I develop my practice and shape my career, I am finding that less time spent with pencil and paper activities and more time with open-ended tasks enriches student learning. These opportunities offer students opportunities to learn how to solve problems, and to learn how to present, as well as to demonstrate their degree of mastery of the curriculum outcomes. I hope to have my students go home and exclaim, “Look what I made (or learned, or solved, or tried).” Rather than, “My teacher said...”

As I look back at my formal education (elementary school through graduate school) I have come to discover that my assessment practice is one that mirrored those of the teachers whom I worked under in the past. Generally speaking the assessment strategy that I had used in my professional practice was a summative approach. Garrison and Ehringhaus (2007) describe Summative Assessments as those that: “are given periodically to determine at a particular point in time what students know and do not know.” What I hope to avoid for my students is the feeling they are ignorant of knowing which outcomes to regurgitate at a time prescribed by someone else. Despite doing well on summative tests, I often tell my students I truly did not understand grade eight mathematics until I was in my thirties. Obviously, this concept attainment was much later than my teachers, parents and even myself would have hoped for. Unfortunately, I cannot even recall what my coping strategies were to get me through mathematics from age twelve until thirty. As a teacher, I want to create situations in which my students are not just

covering curricula, but actually learning it, and I am hopeful that I can give them the tools such that they can, in the future, realize their potential without me..

For many teachers to determine if students are learning, much formative assessment is needed. Unfortunately, summative assessments, with no learning for either teacher or student, are commonly used in classrooms. Besides being a common strategy among teachers, many students and parents rely on this assessment strategy. Strickland and Strickland (1998) cited the NCTE/IRA Joint Task Force on Assessment by relating that “parents make sense of a test score or a report card grade or comment based on their own schooling history, beliefs, and values. A test score may look ‘scientific’ and ‘objective,’ but it too must be interpreted which is always a subjective and value-laden process” (pp. 127-128). The appearance of objectivity among assessment tools has been an area troubling to me. I was led to believe that the greatest attribute of an assessment was its objectivity. Period. Nevertheless, I have since come to appreciate that it is the context with which assessments are used as well as the student’s personal experiences and attitudes that must be considered, rather than an assessment’s supposed scientific objectivity.

Hutchinson and Hayward (2005) stated: “‘ability’ comes to be defined as what is measured in tests, rather than as learning what is taught in programs and, because the score or grade looks seductively tidy and exact, we attribute considerably more meaning to it than is actually justified by the evidence” (p.242). Given that students and other interested parties feel that summative evaluation is the preferred mode of student evaluation the proponents of formative assessments and those who wish to dispense with numerical summative grading have a significant challenge before them. I am one of those proponents.

It is very difficult to take a thematically integrated unit like my solar project and reduce all of the components into one tidy and exact score. How could this be possible for a student who

doesn't arrive at school with the necessary materials or attitude? How can this summative approach work effectively if there is little support from home? How do I assign value to something that is made from cardboard and aluminum cans that looks as if needs to be delivered to the landfill? All of these traits and others cannot be scored. Nor, do I believe that they can be dropped from the assessments. Each component is equally important and must be assessed. The students must be able to discuss and self-assess the experience of making solar heaters, cookers and stills (and as many other learning opportunities as possible) in their entirety. Warts and all.

I have been fortunate to land a teaching job in a public school division in which I have significant freedom and support to explore and implement, for lack of a better term, alternative approaches to education. The area I feel will have the most impact for my professional practice and have the greatest impact on my students is the implementation of formative assessments. Formative assessment is one aspect of assessment for learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) claim that achievement gains from using such assessment for learning techniques were "among the largest ever reported for educational interventions" (p. 3).

During the course of my graduate studies as I have concentrated on student assessment I realize that my practice requires an overhaul to come in concert with what I am learning about assessment and what I have felt intuitively for a long time. Finally, my intuition is finding a voice and I plan to take the ideas of formative assessment, assessment for learning, and student involved assessments and implement them into my classroom.

Regarding my thesis research and writing, I see one significant trend has arisen from the standardized testing movement. The trend in education is for reliance upon large-scale standardized tests to appraise student achievement. There is merit to using standardized tests, Richard Stiggins (1999) asserted:

I am not rejecting the value of standardized testing. Pressure on students, teachers, and administrators to meet high academic standards as reflected in high test scores can lead to productive work for many. The assessment results can inform very important policy and programmatic decisions. But such testing by itself cannot produce the desired school improvement, because the tests do not deal directly with matters of teacher effectiveness or student motivation.

Stiggins, as one of the founders of the Assessment Training Institute, is a champion of assessment for learning, student involved assessment, and formative assessments. But even if we use standardized tests, and we do, we still must remember the context in which they are administered. That is we must remember the learning objectives that the students have been working to attain, and the social, political, and economic realities that envelope our students.

Stiggins expressed a set of beliefs about standardized testing. “We should continue the limited use of standardized tests where relevant to inform programmatic and policy decisions. At the same time, we must be absolutely certain each and every user of assessment results (from the classroom to the living room, to the boardroom to the legislature) is thoroughly schooled in the meaning and limitations of the scores. In short we must balance of and for learning” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 254). The implication is there is neither much benefit nor harm in administering such tests. I would question the allocation of any resources to such endeavours if there is any chance of misinterpretation of results.

With the prevalence of standardized testing becoming more deeply entrenched in jurisdictions around Saskatchewan, teachers must take student assessment seriously as an educational intervention that can make a difference. I had initially been introduced to the concept

of formative assessments and specifically student involved assessment by a consultant working with the Saskatoon Public School Division. Like many professional development sessions, this was a “one –off” session that did not receive the necessary follow up to ensure that the assessment strategies he shared were being implemented correctly, or even implemented . I was the only staff member truly attempting the student involved assessment strategies. Whether or not I was the only teacher attempting to implement these techniques I cannot really say, but many days it seemed like I was.

Several reasons exist for the reluctance of my colleagues to use the student involved assessment strategies. The most common reason cited by my colleagues was that they were already using rubrics. The difference between their rubrics and the student involved assessment strategies was that they were telling the students what they were expected to know, do and learn by the end of a learning episode. The second reason shared was that colleagues were well into their careers, some with over twenty-five years of experience, and they felt there was little need to change what they were doing. It seemed to some that if their practice was not flawed then there was no need to change it. Some even stated that “there was no need to reinvent the wheel.”

The phrase “there is no need to reinvent the wheel,” while I must admit to having used it during professional conversations, is one that I can no longer tolerate. The reason is simple. I had become over the first five years of my teaching career, a father to two daughters. I also realized that I did not like school as a youth, undergraduate, or as a graduate student. There are many times I feel better suited to “modified grad studies” if such a program existed. So, when I combine my experiences as a student and a teacher with parenthood, I realized that I needed to change my teaching practice to one that will invigorate my students the way I hope my own children will be stimulated by their learning. The provincial curriculum guide largely guides my

professional repertoire, to ensure that I am meeting my obligations for students attaining the learning outcomes. However, I have a tremendous need to change the material I use frequently to suit the kids I am working with. I find there is a need to reinvent the wheel, or at least to adjust the tire pressure.

The logical step to take is to involve students in making their own educational decisions. This means they need to be involved in the assessment process. While student involved assessment strategies are being espoused by Saskatoon Public School Division, it is rarely practiced. I would argue based on my experience, that few teachers are using these strategies and techniques to their fullest potential. I would like to examine middle level teachers' assessment practices to explore the extent to which they are using student-involved assessment and also examine the rationale for not using such student involved assessment techniques.

Based on my feeling that few teachers are truly practicing student involved assessment strategies effectively, and as a result "any students do not understand what it is they are meant to be doing in class. In other words, they do not understand the criteria for success, and so are unable to produce high-quality work" (White & Frederiksen, 1998, cited in Wiliam, 2006, p.17). This, combined with the vast majority of parents, want to see a discreet score or letter grade. I feel these ideas are important to explore.

My first question is, "what do teachers believe about formative assessment strategies and student involved assessment?" We need to determine whether or not teachers view this as another educational initiative du jour, or if they feel it has merit, but may need some supports to properly implement.

The second question I will examine is, "what do teachers believe the stakeholders, students, teachers, parents and the community at large, will think about implementing these

strategies?” What are the perceptions teachers hold about students, parents and the community at large regarding student involved assessment strategies?

The focus of this study will be on the extent to which five middle years teachers are using formative assessment. I will be sensitive to how teachers can be empowered to use more formative assessment approaches. Specifically, the three questions are:

1. What do five middle years teachers believe about formative assessment strategies and student involved assessment?
2. What are the perceptions these five teachers hold about students, parents and the community at large regarding student involved assessment strategies?
3. What methods do these teachers suggest for giving teachers voice to call out this crucial initiative?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To discover what my student assessment philosophy is now or might be and to ensure it evolves into something that will prevent my students from developing a profound distaste for school, I explored why students are evaluated. W. James Popham (2005) described the rationale for teachers understanding assessment practices. He stated teachers evaluate students for several traditional reasons: “to diagnose students’ strengths and weaknesses; to monitor students’ progress; to assign grades to students; and to determine instructional effectiveness” (p. 11).

Popham also stated contemporary reasons teachers must know about assessment. Today’s reasons according to him are that “test results determine public perceptions of educational effectiveness; students’ assessment performances are increasingly seen as part of the teacher evaluation process; as clarifiers of instructional intentions, assessment devices can improve instructional quality” (2005, p. 17).

In relying on these traditional reasons for assessment, many teachers rely solely on summative assessments. Garrison and Ehringhaus (2007) provide examples of summative assessments and their intended use:

Many associate summative assessments only with standardized tests such as state assessments, but they are also used at and are an important part of district and classroom programs. Summative assessment at the district/classroom level is an accountability measure that is generally used as part of the grading process...here are some examples of summative assessments; state assessments, district benchmark or interim assessments, end-of-unit or chapter tests, end-of-term or semester exams, scores that are used for accountability for schools (AYP) and students (report card

grades). The key is to think of summative assessment as a means to gauge, at a particular point in time, student learning relative to content standards.

Earl (2003) corroborated this sentiment by stating:

Assessment of learning is still the predominant approach to assessment in most schools, and the modes of choice are tests, essays, and projects. Even when teachers use informal assessments such as questioning in class and observing students, they typically do so to make or confirm judgments about individual students, and they rarely retain the information for very long or find a way of preserving it for future consideration. (p. 42)

Strickland and Strickland (1998) described the difficulties teachers face with a primarily summative approach to student assessment:

When teachers write report cards...they must...represent a student's literate development in all its complexity, often within severe time, space, and format constraints. They must also accomplish this within the diverse relationships and cultural backgrounds among the parents, students, and administrators who might read the report. Some teachers are faced with reducing extensive and complex knowledge about each student's development to a single word or letter. (p. 128)

I believe that most teachers fall into this predicament for a variety of reasons I hoped to uncover during the research phase of my thesis. Popham (2005) shared his concern with teachers relying on the continued use of flawed practice:

It is inconceivable than an entire profession would allow its members to be judged using the wrong measurement tools. Yet, in education, that is

precisely what is going on. And some teachers, largely because they do not specifically understand why standardized achievement tests ought to evaluate schooling, compliantly accept this profound misuse of educational tests. Such teachers may have an intuitive idea that students' scores on standardized achievement tests provide no clear picture of instructional quality, but they can't tell you why. (p. 348)

Teachers intuitively know that something is not right. They can see when the results align it proves their intuition is correct. The struggle comes from understanding and dissecting how their teaching methods or even the curriculum outcomes are failing to provide the standardized results based measures. Given Strickland's statement suggesting that teachers do not understand the use of standardized tests to evaluate schooling, perhaps what is needed is a means to understand standardized testing and what purpose the standardized test serves. Particularly as standardized testing does not align to the formative assessment evidence they may have gathered.

Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 7) described formative assessment as "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged." Under this definition, it seems that standardized testing and summative evaluations ought to be included among the learning activities. While I have a bias in favour of formative assessment as the primary driver of educational decision-making, I have come to see the value of collecting some quantified data with respect to student learning. For example, counting the number of exercises a student can perform in a given time frame. This data set, however, must also be accompanied with the appropriate formative assessment for the student to be able to act on the data and then make the necessary changes of their own accord.

Haladyna (1999) stated, “teachers tend to vary in their definition of what a grade represents; their beliefs and principles; and the criteria that they use in grading” (p. 135). Haladyna did not fully explore teachers’ definitions, beliefs, principles, or criteria. He further asserted that “most teachers do not have the basic instruction about assessment and grading needed to function in the classroom” (p. 136).

David Carless (2007) provides some further clarification why teachers may be reticent to employ formative assessments and student involved assessments:

In particular, large class sizes and heavy workloads often present a barrier to teachers’ implementation of formative assessment. This might lead them to believe that formative assessment, whilst having a solid theoretical base, risks being somewhat impractical, too time consuming and hence incompatible with the demands of schooling. (p. 173)

If teachers actually say that formative assessments are “incompatible” with the demands of schooling, then some further research is warranted to uncover exactly where the incompatibilities are being experienced and what demands of schooling are preventing teachers from employing an appropriate assessment program in their classrooms.

Earl (2003) who cited Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam provided more reasons for teachers’ reluctance to use formative assessments:

Teachers’ tendency to assess quantity of work and presentation, rather than quality of learning; greater attention given to marking and grading, much of it tending to lower the self-esteem of students, rather than to providing advice for improvement; a strong emphasis on comparing students with each other, which demoralizes the less successful students;

teachers' feedback to students serving social and managerial purposes rather than helping them to learn more effectively; teachers not knowing enough about their students' learning needs. (p. 44)

Many teachers still favour an empirical approach to student assessment, that being the use of percentage to indicate empirical rating. Earl (2003) indicated there is change, but she painted a picture that may displease teachers:

Rethinking assessment is one small part of boosting the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Classrooms where assessment is viewed as an integral part of learning are very different from other classrooms. Teachers who are working with a new view of assessment as part of learning are finding that it isn't possible to change assessment and leave everything else the same. When assessment changes, so does teaching, so does classroom organization, and so does interaction with parents. (p. 45)

Change is required. Worksheets are no longer appropriate and the easy percentage based marking is no longer acceptable. To align the classroom and teaching methods to a competence based outcome will require effort and a thorough examination of the purpose and objective of the teacher's pedagogy. Not an easy expectation.

Change is not something many people embrace. People in general will proclaim they have a great desire to change, but when faced with significant change they quickly back down and revert to what they know best. Teachers all possess unit plans, discipline plans, seating plans and plans to revert to when our other plans fail. For some, worksheets are the entire plan. Do teachers have the time, or take the time, to get to know their students? If not, then how can we honestly assess our students' learning?

Farr and Trumbull (1997) shared one example of why it is imperative we understand who our students are and the social conditions from which they come to us

Differences in Ways of Knowing and Learning: what counts as intelligent behaviour is variable from culture to culture; what counts as knowledge and evidence for knowing something, as well as appropriate ways of displaying knowledge are also culturally variable. For example, the European-American style of argument is to make an allegation and then support it. Apparently, Chinese tend to do just the opposite: they first offer a series of pieces of evidence that support a concluding statement to follow. (p. 15)

By understanding what our students consider to be intelligent, or learning, or useful to meeting the learning objectives we set, we can better assess what they are learning and where they are in relation to the learning objective.

A large part of the difficulty with our current student assessment practices may lie in our failure to explore the theoretical framework of contemporary assessment. Valerie Janesick (2006) provided a succinct description of assessment from a postmodern frame of reference.

Postmodernism, according to Janesick, questions several assumptions. The first assumption is there is a primacy and legitimacy of Western reason and its social, political, economic, and educational effects without an understanding of how these values affect other nations. Postmodernism also questions whether there even can be a specific definition of Western educational effects, be it style of schooling, methodology for teaching delivery, or our testing and assessment of learning. Postmodernism also questions obligatory Western heroes who presuppose a privilege for these heroes, often resulting in some form of unethical behavior

self-justified by this privilege, which in turn reinforces a double standard that the West can critique others but cannot itself be a target of genuine criticism. It further challenges stories of colonialism, expansionism, progress, and the success of science which neglect the working poor, minorities, and the erosion of the working environment leading to, often, a denial of class, race, and gender issues in schools and society.

Janesick described student assessment from a postmodern framework. Those who conduct assessment from a postmodern perspective demand a framework that: recognizes the power of class, race, and gender differences and how these shape educational outcomes; exposes the ways power works to structure inequity; promotes a narrative of hope, complexity, and multiple competing perceptions of social reality; conceptualizes ways which promote a more human and hopeful approach to school, work, parenting, play and so on; understands that teachers are students and students are teachers; realizes that no one vision of the world is enough to change the world; demands that assessments of students be fair; allows children to be children and to progress through the stages of development without thinking of children as miniature adults (pp. 16-17).

From this postmodern perspective, formative assessments and student-involved assessments will be a nice tidy fit. As some of the literature has shown, there is little that is tidy about student assessment. Elwood (2006) stated: “changing the culture of assessment means developing a shared language regarding goals of learning and teaching as well as shared understandings of the purposes of assessment in meeting such goals” (p. 220). She is not the only one who is aware of the realities of changing our assessment practices. Slabbert and Hattingh (2006) proclaimed:

Teachers must ensure the building of a post-modern community that seeks to understand lived experience and the self in relation to others and the world. Teachers must violate the restrictions of the traditional standardized lesson plan with a celebration of the novel, different, unfamiliar, unexpected, unusual, and even what may have traditionally been regarded as absurd. (p. 713)

For teachers to celebrate the “novel [that is unique], different, unfamiliar, unexpected, unusual, and absurd” is surely not too much to expect. The one thing I appreciate every day as a parent and teacher is that the novel, unexpected, and absurd is precisely why I spent so much of my time with kids. I have no desire to shape them or mold them so they fit into one of Western society’s economic and social pigeonholes. I have also come to appreciate that it is virtually impossible to quantify a student’s learning with this postmodern perspective. Because of this realization, the question that arises in my mind is how to assess student learning both in a formative sense and accurately in a quantified summative way. We are still required to produce an average for language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Despite this requirement there is no one set way to derive an average nor is there any continuity from teacher to teacher or grade to grade.

As I appreciate changing my entire professional practice to fit postmodern ideals, there appeared a cautionary voice. Eisner (1985) stated:

Although I feel uneasy about the conventional methods of evaluation...my uneasiness does not lead me to reject scientific approaches to either evaluation or educational research. Rather, my uneasiness results from the feeling that such approaches, and the methods of inquiry regarded as

legitimate within their borders, somehow fail to tell the whole story. As a result of the partial view that such methods provide, a biased, even distorted picture of the reality we are attempting to understand and improve can occur. (p. 147)

While he felt that conventional evaluation provides only a partial picture, he seemed to suggest there is utility in using such assessments. Like Stiggins' statement cited earlier, he is advocating a balanced approach. While conventional assessments may disrupt the postmodern approach, it is useful to realize that to communicate the entire story of student learning, we need portions of the story so the entire context of student learning is presented. I believe the key is to enable students to decide for themselves what portions of the story to include, how those portions tell the story of their learning, and how they may change future learning episodes to ensure that learning objectives are met. Similarly, teachers must have their assessment stories shared so our collective wisdom can be brought to bear upon student learning. Taras (2005) stated that a balance is not only desirable, but it is a requirement for learning objectives to be met. In addition, she made a case for teachers to reflect upon their practice. "Recognizing that summative assessment is central and necessary to all assessment, it should stop the demonisation of assessment for validation and certification, and see it as a stepping stone to learning" (p. 476).

Strickland and Strickland (1998) described the tendency for students and parents to favour a summative evaluation approach.

It's difficult to overcome the odds, because many kids and their parents believe what grades supposedly tell them, and the kids become what the schools expect them to be. As Diana Dreyer (1994) says, a "vicious cycle revolves around dependence and grades, an interaction promoted by a

numbers-driven culture overly reliant on measures that do not begin to address performance in context...Students are all too aware of this grading phenomenon, an awareness leading to dependence...on the grade itself, a letter or number communicating to the world what kind of people they are and indicating what they are likely to become, a symbol ripe with ramifications for the present and the future, an extrinsic reward – or punishment – so overwhelming that we tend to overlook the intrinsic value of learning” (p. 131).

I would argue that it is possible and reasonable to include teachers among those who share the beliefs that Strickland and Strickland describe.

When we consider that summative assessments are necessary as Taras would state, and look at the purported value of formative assessments as Strickland and Strickland would promote, it is easy to see that teachers are conflicted about what type of student assessment to provide. It appears teachers are resistant to change for a simple set of reasons. Torrance and Pryor (2001) stated that “innovations are rarely accepted by teachers because they are viewed as impractical; they do not accord with teachers’ own tried and tested ways of teaching” (p. 618). By talking to teachers, I hope to learn what they believe about formative assessment and student involved assessment, what their perceptions of stakeholders think about assessment innovations, and what they believe can support teachers in changing assessment practices. Teachers are stuck in a summative rut.

If we continue to follow a postmodern tack then we also examine our political, social, and economic, realities. In North America, one need only look at the United States and its No Child Left Behind legislation to get a sense of what is happening to education in light of the

standardized testing movement. The United States is facing at least a recession, and at worst a depression. NATO nations are embroiled in a war on “terror.” And crumbling municipal infrastructure (think falling overpasses in Minnesota and Quebec, and New Orleans post hurricane Katrina) is plaguing our world. We need a new approach for how we do things. One basis for a new approach must lie in education. The best way to change education is through assessment reform. Filer (2000, p. 126) pointed out “classroom assessment does not take place in a social vacuum, but is an integral part of what constitutes classroom life”. If we are to provide authentic learning opportunities, then classroom life must extend out into our students’ lives beyond the walls of the classroom. Students must see that learning and life experiences are inextricably linked. Students must see that transfer of value from their learning experience to benefit their experience, as demonstrated in the solar pop can project mentioned earlier.

Otero (2006) provides a wonderful way for teachers to rethink their practice by considering their position among the student body.

Teachers and teacher educators who can recognize their own knowledge as knowledge-in-information are in a better position to recognize the value of the knowledge of others, especially if it is not fully consistent with their own. Recognizing our own knowledge as knowledge-in-information helps us reposition ourselves from identities of teachers as knowers who provide information for our students to identities of teachers as learners who collect, interpret, and use information provided by our students. (p. 254)

By showing our students we are learners and not knowers providing information, we may place ourselves in a position to address the economic, political, and social woes that face us. Not that we are facing the apocalypse but there are those among us living in poverty, or facing some

other crippling social condition. Farr and Trumbull (1997) share revelations useful in describing the social, political, and economic realities we are facing:

Our alarm arises in part from an increasing sense that traditional power relations that serve to maintain the status quo have not been disturbed enough to allow for meaningful participation in reform efforts of those professionals who have the deepest understanding of the needs of underserved students, i.e., those educators who themselves are members of non-dominant groups. Assessment has in particular had catastrophic consequences for students from such groups in the past by virtue of incorrectly labeling them as deficient (without evaluating their opportunities to learn) and thus preventing them from having the educational opportunities they deserve. (p. 4-5)

Farr and Trumbull provide some staggering statistics to show the urgency of changing our methods of teaching and assessing our students' learning. "From 1990 – 2010, the U.S. population is expected to grow by 42 million. Hispanics are expected to account for 47% of the growth, African-Americans 22%, Asians and other people of colour 18% and Whites only 13%" (p.13). Similar trends will follow in Canada and Saskatchewan as we promote immigration to fill labour requirements and as our Aboriginal population continues to grow. The implications of these increases in marginalized populations indicate our need to change the way we do business in schools. By failing to act we will, at the least, marginalize a greater number of people by squandering the immeasurable talents within those groups.

In light of the preceding literature survey, particularly the remarks from Farr and Trumbull citing the catastrophic consequences for students from non-dominant cultural groups, I

feel that my research question is more relevant than ever. Even though I am a white male in my early forties a member of the dominant culture, I have a responsibility to not only my students but to my occupation to fully examine my practice and make necessary changes. I want to ensure that my changes are carefully considered and have an impact. Developing an understanding of teacher's perceptions of formative assessments and student-involved assessment strategies is vital. It is well and good to implement change. But this is a highly politically charged endeavor. Only by ensuring teachers have been given a strong voice, and the tools and resources to support our change, can we realize this.

From the literature, it is clear that assessment should be used to improve instructional effectiveness. Assessment of learning or summative assessments are often used as an accountability measure. When only summative assessments are used, student assessment becomes reductionist, providing an incomplete picture of student learning. If it is the only kind of assessment used, it does not provide information to student learners about how to adjust their learning. It can contribute negatively to their developing sense of selves, either by inflating their ideas of who they are as learners, or destroying their perceptions of themselves as learners, and it does not provide sufficient information to the teacher about more or less successful practices.

I believe that change is desperately needed but recognize that it is overarching in its scope. It will require almost a wholesale reworking of how we deliver instruction and what we can reasonably expect of our students. Besides this we must be prepared to teach these new assessment approaches to parents who may be more reluctant than their children to accept change.

Given these conditions exist, it is appropriate to reiterate what Janesick said about assessment reform: those who conduct assessment from a postmodern perspective demand a

framework that: recognizes the power of class, race, and gender differences and how these shape educational outcomes; exposes the ways power works to structure inequity; promotes a narrative of hope, complexity, and multiple competing perceptions of social reality; conceptualizes ways which promote a more human and hopeful approach to school, work, parenting, play and so on; understands that teachers are students and students are teachers; realizes that no one vision of the world is enough to change the world; demands that assessments of students be fair; allows children to be children and to progress through the stages of development without thinking of children as miniature adults.

This makes my questions even more relevant. To what extent are teachers using formative assessment and student-involved assessment and how can we empower teachers to embrace formative assessment and become less reliant on summative assessments?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

For the research I performed qualitative research. My goal was to interview teachers employed within the Saskatoon Public School Division and teach middle years students (grades six to eight). By exploring teachers' perceptions about formative assessment and student involved assessment I was able to determine to what extent these five middle years teachers used formative assessment and I developed ideas from them on how teachers can be empowered to embrace these practices.

Charles (1998) defines qualitative research as “research that yields extensive narrative data, which are analyzed verbally” (p. 370). With the notion of context taking a great deal of importance in my research, the theoretical framework I will use as a frame of reference is postmodern. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) provide clarity.

During modernism, beliefs in human progress through rationalism and science; the idea of a stable, consistent, and coherent self; and positivist approach to knowing – beliefs that have held sway in the West since the Enlightenment – were seen to explain the human condition.

Postmodernists argue, however, that these foundations are no longer in place. The rise of the nuclear age, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the global threat to the environment have stripped away the possibility of human progress based on rationalism and caused many people in different areas of human life to question the integrity of progress (p. 21).

My research will help answer the question of what teachers perceive to be the assessment reality today in Saskatoon Public schools at the middle level. I anticipated from this research

some critical questions about the integrity of our educational structure and the inherent boundaries will also emerge.

Further to questioning the integrity of human progress, or in my case student assessment progress, a postmodern frame of reference was applied:

Postmodernists argue that you can only know something from a certain position. This assertion challenges the possibility of knowing what is true through the proper, that is, scientific, use of reason. It is a rejection of what Donna Haraway (1991) called the “view from nowhere.” People do not reason or conceptualize outside the self’s location in a specific historical time and body; hence, this perspective emphasizes interpretation and writing as central features of research. (p. 21)

By immersing myself in a teacher’s classroom, and conducting unstructured interviews in which the participant is the one dispensing knowledge, and is seen on an equal plane as the researcher, a richer, more accurate picture of our assessment practices emerged.

Frey and Schmitt (2007) shared the sentiment that assessment research is difficult to interpret because it is “hard to judge theoretical benefits of assessment changes because...researchers, advocates and teachers have not arrived at a consistent definition of what these terms mean or what these practices look like” (p. 402). By conducting my research in the participant’s environment, we could create a common assessment language and therefore a productive, ongoing, critical conversation surrounding this important educational instrument.

I am, like all of us in the teaching occupation, heavily reliant on the collective wisdom of our colleagues and our students. This sentiment has again given me a gentle nudge toward qualitative research. I am confident this approach, while being openly at odds with my earlier

statements about distilling student learning into discreet, quantifiable pieces of data, was the correct approach. Since I am interested in implementing educational interventions intended to improve my practice, I have been conscious of limiting my bias entering into the study and it having a detrimental effect. Bogdan and Biklin (2007) helped to provide encouragement:

What qualitative researchers attempt to do, however, is to objectively study the subjective states of their subjects. While the idea that researchers can transcend some of their own biases may be difficult to accept at the beginning, the methods the researchers use aid this process. For one thing, qualitative studies are not impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few subjects. The researcher spends a considerable time in the empirical world laboriously collecting and reviewing piles of data. The data must bear the weight of any interpretation, so the researcher must continually confront his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data. Besides, most opinions and prejudices are rather superficial. The data that are collected provide a much more detailed rendering of events than even the most creatively prejudiced mind might have imagined prior to the study (p. 37 – 38).

Methods

During the data collection I used an open-ended interview strategy. Bogdan and Biklin (2007) provided justification for this approach:

The open-ended nature of the approach allows the informants to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from structured by prearranged questions. In this type of interviewing, questionnaires are not

used; while loosely structured interview guides may sometimes be employed, most often the researcher works at getting the informants to freely express their thoughts around particular topics. (p. 3)

I believed that presenting my participants with a set of questions in advance might produce a less fluid conversation. The most productive learning in my classroom occurs when the dialogue is free and open. I provided my participants some prompts to get them thinking about their student assessment practices. The sample prompts are listed below and the corresponding research question is also indicated:

1. What formal training if any do you have in student assessment? (Pre-service, professional development, university courses, etc.) Question 3.
2. How much of your professional time is spent on assessment activities? Question 1.
3. How much emphasis do you place on formative assessment activities versus summative evaluations? Question 1.
4. In what types of formative assessment activities do you and your students engage? Question 1.
5. In your opinion, are parents and students generally more concerned with formative assessments (the learning process) or summative evaluations (grades and final marks)? Question 2.
6. When planning for instruction how much emphasis do you place on assessment strategies and communicating those strategies to students and parents? Question 2.

7. To what extent do you use rubrics to communicate learning objectives and levels of competency? Question 1.
8. To what extent do you involve students in creating rubrics in order to communicate learning objectives and levels of competency? Question 1.
9. What difficulties have you faced when using summative evaluations? Question 2.
10. What difficulties have you experienced using student involved assessment strategies and formative assessments? Question 2.
11. How do your assessments help students want to learn? Question 1.
12. Do you believe that assessments can do more than simply serve as a means to rank and order students? Question 2.
13. Do you believe that society expects school to function as a means to rank and order students? Question 2.
14. How do you ensure that your assessments are valid? Question 1
15. How do you ensure your assessments are free of bias? Question 1.

While these interview prompts were sent out to the participants approximately one week before our interviews, rarely did we look at them. One participant was insistent that we look at some of the prompts, but only near the conclusion of the interview and in one case we started with the prompts, but then the interview took on a decidedly more fluid and productive tone and we abandoned them. Despite abandoning the prompts, the conversations focused on the purpose of the study – teacher assessment practices.

The interviews occurred in the participant's classroom and at a time mutually convenient. They were expected to be a minimum of forty-five minutes and it was hoped that they would take only one hour. Each participant was informed the data was to be used in a master's degree thesis. Participants were also informed that the interviews would be recorded and subsequently transcribed by me. Participants were provided with a copy of an edited transcript. The transcripts were smoothed narrative versions of the interviews with false starts, repetitions and paralinguistic utterances such as um, uh removed to make it more readable. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to change any responses or to delete any responses, as well as to withdraw at any time during the study. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym. This study was approved by the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, with approval number 07-238.

The teachers were selected for maximum variation. They varied on years of experience, gender, level of post-secondary education, and types of school – suburban, community and inner-city. The only commonality was they were all teaching middle year's students. Participants were also selected based on my perception of their personalities. That is, I felt they were all strong personalities who would share their honest opinions during the interviews and would not tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. The participant pool consisted of three males and two females. The range of length of service was selected to accurately reflect assessment training during their pre-service education. I felt that a more recent graduate from a bachelor of education program would be equipped with the most recent research and methodology in student assessment and the more senior participants would be not as well versed in current formative assessment techniques. A brief description of each participant follows.

JG had been teaching for five years at the time of the interview. JG enjoyed a successful career as a student-athlete at university. JG spent some time as a substitute teacher in high school and elementary school immediately after obtaining a B.Ed. After the first year of substitute teaching, JG began teaching middle years students full time.

JE had been teaching for approximately fifteen years at the time of the interview. JE worked with youth prior to embarking on a teaching career. JE has a flair for drama and is a technology aficionado. In addition to these, JE is a well-rounded teacher who is eager to engage anybody regarding the current state of education with an eye to improving the occupation.

SP spent five years as a substitute teacher prior to working with middle years students full time for a total teaching time of 10 years. SP, like the other participants is eager to improve student assessment. SP also has aspirations to explore other facets of education such as administration.

RV had been teaching for over twenty-five years at the time of interview. RV has worked with students in several grade levels but prefers middle years students. RV may be the most traditional teacher among the participants. Despite this difference in practice from the other participants, student assessment and student involved assessment has figured prominently in RV's professional learning.

DF had been teaching for over twenty-five years at the time of interview. DF is a driven teacher. Organized beyond belief and unyielding in the quest to improve student learning, DF has spent considerable time and energy working with student assessment data.

Because of this, changes in student-involved assessment are of particular interest.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

This thesis is reliant upon a qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts. As a result, I have read the interview transcripts looking for common themes as they relate to my research question: to examine middle level teachers' assessment practices to explore the extent to which they are using formative assessment and student-involved assessment and examine the rationale for not using such student involved assessment techniques. It is important for both me as the author, and for anyone who reads this work to realize that by reading the interview transcripts they might likely come up with different interpretations and or assign more or less significance to a particular section of an interview. The reader is free to draw conclusions, but must take into account their knowledge of the context in which the interviews were conducted. In addition, the reader must consider his or her own context and the application of the data analysis. By doing this, I believe the reader will reach similar conclusions.

Because of a careful analysis of the interviews conducted for this study, eight themes emerged. Two themes were only briefly mentioned by the participants and the other six were discussed at length. These six themes are presented in this chapter with the corresponding dialogue from the interview transcripts, and a description of the context in which the participants shared them.

The two themes not discussed here were; “pre-service training” and “finite learning episodes.” They have been omitted because these themes were only mentioned on one occasion, by two out of the five participants. I refer to them only because they provide some possible avenue for further study. I believe that if pressed, all participants would have revealed that they had little pre-service training in student assessment – formative or summative. This is surprising; there is so little assessment training conducted at the undergraduate level when it may be the

single most effective educational reform according to Black and Wiliam. It also is a glaring example of what is missing from the “profession.”

The theme of “finite learning episodes,” also is interesting in that it may be another research topic. There was mention from two participants on one occasion each that students were satisfied to complete a learning episode and then not have to repeat any portion. This theme relates to how we structure schools and our learning episodes for students, usually using our summative approach to assessment versus a more formative approach whereby students recall previous learning deliberately and apply those competencies to current and future learning episodes.

The themes discussed in the remainder of the chapter are: “professional development,” “culture of marks,” “the need to cover curriculum content,” “co-constructed criteria,” “class size and time” and “student motivation.” Each of these themes will be presented as they relate to the interviews. They are not presented with any regard to order of importance. There is also some overlap among themes. The theme of “progress reports and translating formative assessment into marks,” could be included in the “culture of marks” theme. I feel there is sufficient material to have each be a theme in its own right.

Professional Development

A reasonable working definition of professional development is: “the advancement of skills or expertise to succeed in a particular profession, especially through continued education.” (Retreived from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/professional+development> on June 28, 2014). I found this definition doing a simple Google search using the term “definition of professional development.” What is interesting is that the etymology of this definition dates back

to 1857. This seems to eerily coincide with the dating of the structure of our present day education models. Neither seems to have changed significantly.

Regarding professional development and assessment, it is interesting to note it can be initiated by the teacher on an individual level, or because of school wide initiatives that result from strategic planning at the school level or also at the board level. In an ideal situation, all professional development will neatly fall under the umbrella that comprises not only the school's strategic direction, but also the school division's strategic direction. One participant describes such a school wide approach.

JG: Our school has been focusing on AFL for our last school plan (strategic plan) over the last two years and continuing into next year. We focused mainly on writing for the past two years and next year we are moving on into math which I think will be interesting because I guess I don't do as much of the formative assessment in math and next year we are focusing more on that as a school. I have taken it upon myself to go to as many conferences as I can on assessment.

What JG describes above seems to be an ideal situation, an entire staff dedicating time and resources to focus on assessment for learning in language arts over a prolonged period . Further to that, there is an indication that the assessment strategy will extend into mathematics in the subsequent school year. JG also indicates this will fill a gap . There is an inherent strength in a collaborative approach. That is the teachers may have a tendency to buy in. The bonus in this situation is that JG shows some initiative and seeks out professional development opportunities in assessment for learning.

Another participant, SP, reiterated JG's comments about shared professional development experiences. Teachers will share what they have learned and encourage each other's development.

SP: The one thing that I did find interesting when we shared our ideas at the Literacy for Life conference, everybody in the groups were interested in what each other were doing. That is a quality all teachers share. We all are interested in learning and exploring new areas. These teachers were very interested in my assessment strategies. If anything, it may open up another door for others to ask about different ways of doing things. But it is very easy to fall back on the same old routine because it is easy.

SP provides encouragement, but concludes with a cautionary statement about reverting to familiar routines. JG was also involved in a professional development group that focused on assessing student reading by conducting individual conferences with students. JG is enthusiastic about the opportunity to listen to and discuss student reading individually. But, JG also indicates there are pressures that prevent teachers from conducting more of these individual assessments.

JG: So what I am trying to do this year with the Literacy for Life initiative was to use the couple of half days for professional development was to research our inquiry question. So I took that time and I did my reading conferences with kids. I tried to do one each reporting period and to be honest you can learn more about a kid's reading in a ten minute conference than I did in a whole year. It is just amazing that we do not do more of this and we are not given the opportunity to do more of this type of thing because it just so valuable.

JG alluded to the notion there were too few opportunities to conduct adequate individual assessments for learning. Another pair of middle year's teachers described a waning of support for their school wide formative assessment initiatives.

JM: Do you find that there is a great deal of support within the division? I mean we are hearing that there is a lot of emphasis being placed on AFL. Is there a lot of support, are you offered any help in the form of additional time, or personnel to come in and assist you?

RV: *Not any more. In the beginning, a couple of years ago when we decided as a school that this was a task we were going to take on, yes. There was lots of support; we were provided with resources, we were given access to consultants who would come in and help us.*

DF: *But that was a school wide thing.*

RV: *It was definitely a school wide thing. As our focus changed we have been left on our own.*

Both RV and DF related that the school division was eager to have its teaching staff engage in professional development that improved their understanding and subsequent use of formative assessment techniques. The school was provided ongoing support for a period of one year in a consultant working with staff. The consultant worked with staff as a large group and also provided individual guidance based on self-identification or as a directive from administration (principal specifically).

Ironically, this revealed one of the unfortunate realities of school-wide professional development initiatives: a lack of follow-through because of a change of administration, a change in strategic direction at the school level, and staff changes that resulted in a loss of interest in the initiative. Compounding this was that the consultant was not provided to the school which resulted in an out of sight out of mind mentality. This was an unfortunate turn, since the staff would have surely benefited from additional support as they tried to put theory into practice.

JE, another middle year's teacher, described a personal account of professional development that fell short of making an impact in the assessment arena:

JE: For example, you (the organization) will decide what the topic is, they pool a group of people together into a room, and they give the teachers that information and it is expected that they will use that information and do something (in the future) with it. And that is exactly what we do with students every single day.

Despite avoiding lecture based PD, JE ties the notion of a didactic PD model predominating to the same experiences that our students have in our classrooms. It speaks to the notion that kids and teachers sometimes feel powerless to change what we are doing. JE described an opportunity to engage in professional development that was autonomous, and purposeful with teachers who shared similar interests.

JE: It was interesting this year as part of the literacy for life movement [a SPSD initiative] they had quite a bit of professional development money available. I felt that I used the money and time very well largely because I avoided professional development sessions. Instead, I chose to take

time to read materials that interested me. Given some time and direction it made a huge impact on my professional development. The other thing was that we were able to meet together with teachers and discuss and research specific action research questions that were of interest to us. We were given time to just go and work on the question without anyone telling us what to do. We were just able to go and do it. So I think that there are models of professional development are in a state of flux. This is especially true in the public school systems. They are probably deviating from traditional educational models.

It is interesting to read the transcripts from the interview and realize there are many similarities between the manner we participate in professional development and our teaching practices. For example, I have been in grade alike professional development sessions during which teachers were told what tasks we were to achieve. We were required to collect writing samples on a particular topic within a particular time frame regardless of what we were teaching. This top down approach had the effect of upsetting any sense of flow in the teaching and learning dynamic. This contrasts with more positive PD events. SP talked about teachers sharing and the positive attributes of this approach. Teachers were valued as learners, and were expected to co-learn and co-teach. JE talked about having funds to carry out his own PD. Teachers were valued as professionals, as autonomous and responsible learners, capable of managing their own PD. But the problems were in the inconsistent nature of the follow through and in obtaining timely support so initiatives could be appropriately applied to classroom settings.

Culture of Marks / Grades

I asked JG specifically how students responded to formative assessment strategies. The response was straightforward and also repeated several times during the subsequent interviews with other participants.

JM: How do you find the kids generally when you do use formative assessment [FA] strategies? Are they receptive to it or do they want to see a summative evaluation such as a numerical grade or letter grade or a percentage?

JG: *The culture in schools has been for years that students want to see their mark. "What is my mark?" That has been the practice for so long that students are still getting used to the idea of having some input into how they will be marked. They are used to teachers handing back their paper with a percentage mark on it, the students look at it and they throw it in their folder or the garbage and then move onto the next one.*

It seems sad that we rely on other's opinions of our work and then consider that to be the final say in our academic lives. However, JG is correct. Even in my graduate courses I would look for the mark, and then deposit my paper into a vast pile of other essays and journal articles. Rarely did I read the feedback on those papers. Who would have thought that someone interested in formative assessment would ignore any developmental feedback that might improve my learning?

JG shared insight into my own predisposition to rely on summative evaluation. Students depend upon teachers telling them exactly what to do during a learning episode. How many

words to write a paper, what colour scheme to use on a poster board, how many points to include on a written response item on a test and so on.

JG: The tough thing I am finding is that even with FA and building rubrics with kids and having them take ownership over criteria is that they are used to being force-fed. They are used to us telling them what to do, what the resulting mark is, and what the next assignment is going to be. ...I think that you need to start slowly and work with what you are comfortable with and move on from there. Kids are the same. They are not comfortable yet with the building of rubrics and the establishment of criteria. You need to also lead them along slowly so they can get used to it. We have a culture of marks and percentages and that is what they are used to. So it is not only getting the teachers used to it, it is also a matter of getting the students used to a new way of assessment.

There is valuable advice to be gleaned from JG. It is perfectly acceptable to slow down and give oneself permission to implement a new assessment philosophy at a pace that allows the teacher and student to process the cultural shift and understand that it may be a messy, frustrating and ambiguous venture. JG reflected upon what has transpired inside the classroom over the first several years of service. JG further questions the direction of assessment philosophy and really challenges that quantifying student learning has any sort of validity.

JG: The more I learn about assessment I can't help but feel that I have been doing a poor job of it. This is not to say that I am doing a bad job, but I don't think that anything is truly free of bias. I think that if we look at a learning objective and ask if they know it or not. It doesn't need to

be marked as a seventy-eight, we need to know if they can do it or not. I don't agree with even having percentages. I know it is necessary to have them perhaps in senior high school because in university they get percentages. But I would say that up to grade eight the point of having percentages is really useless in my opinion. This is a result of the learning I have done with respect to assessment. I am speaking as an individual who is a product of percentages and I have always liked to see my mark. I think that having a kid sit down with you and having them talk you through a math problem. This year I am conducting reading conferences with my kids, and asking questions like "how did you make that connection?" They tell me about the connections and then I know that they are able to meet certain learning objectives. It is hard to put a percentage on a kid's reading ability unless you sit and listen to them read and ask them "How did you make that visualization? What was in your head? What was going through your mind while you were reading that book?" Then I can say that they know how to do this. But how can I put a percentage on that? Is it 100%, or did they only tell me 80% of their visualization? I just don't understand how percentages become relevant when we are doing some of these assessments.

Our conversation also addressed that students will take on a sense of autonomy for their learning. My question to JG was really asking for a prediction whether we would experience the cultural shift from marks and grades to a more self-directed culture of learning.

JM: Do you think that over time as you get better at those assessment strategies and techniques that those kids who aren't typically turned on by school will, when they realize that they have some power to decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn it may become a little more engaged?

JG: *I think that, and I have seen some improvement throughout the year in some cases, the funny thing is that when you have those students do a self-assessment, and they hand in their work, they may self-assess at a level two on a five point rubric, my question to them is why are you handing in something that is a two? If you think that it is a two, what do you think I am going to think it is? Again, some kids will realize that there is more work to be done, and some will still state, "This is what I did." That is frustrating especially when they know what was expected of them. It is frustrating also that they assess themselves at a low level, and produce a low level of work. I am beginning to see am more students meeting the criteria, and justify that they deserve full marks. This does get back to the marks, but it is a positive step.*

JG's remarks indicate that we are still much stuck within the mire that requires students to seek validation for their efforts. It also describes students half-heartedly working with assessment criteria but only in so much as they can then justify that they have completed the task. Once completed, they can then move onto the next task. How many times have we as teachers had similar feelings? We all too often state we have taught something, marked it,

recorded the result and moved on and then have failed to revisit the assignment as part of a future episode.

JG further speculated that kids generally see themselves locked into a particular niche within the marks paradigm that seems to be a self-fulfilling assessment loop.

JM: Those kids who are self-assessing at a two, don't you feel that there is some utility in having them recognize that they are being honest with themselves and with you?

JG: *Yes, because I know that they are at least conscious of knowing what they need to do, and how to improve their learning. It is a matter of getting them to take that next step. But it is good that they recognize that. I also feel that part of that (low level self-assessment) is that they are used to seeing that two. They see themselves as a two. That is part of this culture of marks. They feel that they are a 50% student, or whatever the case may be. Then they get stuck in that rut of thinking that this is what I am. I guess what I do see more of when you give them a target, is that do they see what they are shooting for and they take a little more time to try to meet that target?*

Those, for me, are the key assessment questions. Do they see the target? And, will students take a little more time to reach that target? This seems to further illustrate the importance of teachers taking the time to follow JG's lead and replicate the reading conference in as many situations as possible. We frequently state in our division advertising we are "inspiring learning." Can we really state we are inspiring learning? I think we are trying, but due

to a variety of circumstances we fall short of inspiration in a lot of cases and end up with task completion as an acceptable outcome.

Regarding outcomes, one of the responsibilities teachers have is to regularly report on student progress. Two who were interviewed together, RV and DF, shared their insight how formative assessment strategies fail to align with our current reporting structure. We are required by law in Saskatchewan to report on student progress three times per school year. In the Saskatoon Public School Division, this is done in November, March and June at the close of the school year.

I asked RV and DF specifically about the match between their AFL practices and the school division's report cards. Both RV and DF noted that AFL did not fit on the report cards, with RV saying that with AFL, evaluation changes regularly, but this doesn't fit with the percentage required on report cards, and DF pointing out the report cards had little room for comments.

This led to a conversation about the necessity of assigning percentage grades. Both RV and DF believed that percentages were required by their school division.

JM: One of the prompts we came up with in an earlier conversation was that you felt assessment for learning (AFL) did not match up with the reporting criteria that we are meant to use on the reports cards.

RV: *It doesn't. That is partly because when you do formative assessments, and you are truly involving the students in what you are doing, and then your evaluation changes constantly. Although the report card has room for the comments, so that you can create your own*

evaluation on the report card because it is still tied into a percentage, we run into problems.

DF: For example, marking a class average and a student's individual average doesn't work for me when you are doing AFL. It doesn't fit at all.

JM: Are we necessarily tied to a percentage? Can we not opt out and do something different?

RV: No we can't. Not at this point in time.

DF: I think that they are going to move to that in time, if the system (SPSD #13) truly believes in AFL.

RV: The trouble is that the parents really want that percentage there. It was how they were raised; it is what they relate to. That way they know immediately when they look at that 72% average for their child, and see a class average of 68%, they can then say, "Johnny is doing alright." I feel fine. I have nothing to worry about.

JM: So it seems that there is a steep learning curve for the students to wrap their heads around this [FA], and also the teachers and parents as well.

DF: It is a big learning curve for teachers because we have to justify everything that we are doing. And then to have to explain this to twenty-seven upset parents because you don't have a sheet of marks to show them when they come for interviews... I think that Red Cross swimming has it down to a science. "Here are the six things that your kid has to do

to pass this level. Oh, look, they aren't doing the flutter kick quite right, so we'll work on that some more until they get it to the top of the rubric."

Then they move on. It is just common sense. Now we do have an enormous amount of learning objectives. But if your kid cannot tread water for three minutes, they will not pass and nobody cares that the kids are all the same age in that group. Sometimes I wonder if we have done a disservice to system by doing that [age alike classes]. There should be skill groupings as opposed to age groupings for everything we do in school. Socially kids do benefit from being with their age appropriate peers, but if we are doing AFL I could have any age group of kids in my class to do it properly.

JM: You mentioned the Nelson math program and having to justify twenty-seven times your student assessments, and the board mandates that you teach that particular program, do you receive any support or marketing materials, for lack of a better term, that can help to communicate to parents?

DF: *Well the program has canned letters in it, but our report cards still have the class average and student average in it. So they want you to be able have the student go through the process and to understand what they are doing and then respond to a key question that you would mark on a rubric. But when it comes to report card time, parents do not read my comments for one thing. I use the comments right out of the Nelson math program and there are no marks associated with Nelson math at*

all. Truly it is a matter of the student having gone through the process for the key question or they did not get it. There are also levels that they can progress through. I don't know how you give a kid a 95% on a math quiz, then. Parents just want to know what they got (the score) in math.

From this exchange it is easy to see there are some very challenging obstacles to fully implementing a true formative assessment philosophy. DF and RV both related the need by parents to see a percentage grade. Further, many parents want to see what the class average is in a particular subject so they can justify in their own minds just how well or poorly their children are performing academically. DF also stated plainly that parents rarely take the time to read the comments written on the progress reports. I have had many interviews with parents centered around nothing more than the percentage that appears on the progress report. The comments written are a reflection of what the student can do within a subject, what they are having difficulty with and suggestions for improving their performance. The difficulty, it seems is that we need to separate the qualitative from the quantitative so the culture of progress reporting becomes more formative with the parents intimately involved. I am certain an entire study could be devoted to unlocking the true meaning(s) parents ascribe to progress reports.

RV and DF also reiterated the benefits of interviewing each student as part of assessment with our current math program. They also suggested that it is nearly impossible to interview each student. We do not have the time. Behaviour, resources, space, and differences in abilities among students are just a few pressures that bite into a teacher's lesson. DF made the suggestion that grouping kids by age rather than ability level is a possible detriment to a truer formative experience. There is a lot of validity to that statement. This is an area that may benefit from further research.

SP describes working with students to move to a more formative assessment philosophy. There are mixed results in the success experienced, but one can glean from the following statements there is also an appetite for teachers to try some new approaches with students. SP describes a grade eight culture fair.

SP: Yes. This year when we did our Culture fair I used past boards that students did not want to keep. We used these to establish our assessment criteria and to discuss what students in the past did well and what they could have done better. This year the products from the students were out of this world. They worked really hard to make sure that there were borders, there were colour pictures, and ultimately how they could score better marks.

Within the culture of marks, SP also stated that one of the key aspects of getting students to buy in to an assessment strategy that was less reliant on a percentage was to engage the kids on two different levels. SP had to acknowledge that AFL would take rather more time than a summative approach. Once SP concluded that, the mechanics of the process could begin. Old student samples were saved and shared and kids were encouraged to discuss their ideas on improvement with each other. The one thing SP referred to most often was posing an open ended question to the kids such as, “what can you do differently to improve?” It would seem this may be a rather frustrating approach in the short term, but once kids can see the improvement in their work, they would surely feel a sense of empowerment like no other regarding their learning.

SP also refers to one of the key barriers we face. That is the persistence of marks as a performance indicator. An aspect of SP’s methodology falls somewhat short in the reflective aspects of FA. Using past student examples to determine what constitutes a good project versus a

poor one is fine provided the process is reflective. The students should decide for themselves regarding which attributes are strong and which are weak. If the teacher displays the posters and tells the students this is good, do this and I will give you an 80%, then it is exactly like using a prescribed rubric to make task completion faster. But, if the students have an opportunity to be reflective, and still make poor decisions, then the teacher has a greater opportunity to empower the student to become a better learner.

For example, low quality criteria are ones like the width or colour of a border for a poster. It is easy to measure, and could have a number assigned to it fairly easily. A high quality criterion is one like the convincing nature of the evidence used in the poster. It is harder to learn what comprises good quality evidence to make a convincing argument than to learn how wide a border is most effective. Which is a more useful skill for a student to learn to do and to assess?

In the following exchange, SP describes encouraging students to improve their performance but rather than centering on improving learning, an emphasis is on improving marks. The external validation takes precedence over learning. This is not a condemnation of SP's practice, but a reflection of the reality in which we work and also an indicator of changing practice. SP also provides insight into how teachers may gradually make FA part of their own practice without making it too uncomfortable.

SP: My main motto is "Go above and beyond." How can you [the students] take this to above and beyond? 110% rather than just what you need to get an 80% or a 70%.

JM: do you find that even though you are using these assessment criteria that are designed for improving their learning that kids are still motivated by a mark or summative evaluation?

SP: *Yes. They always want to see a mark. I think that is engrained in their being. Especially when we, in the senior end, [grades six through eight] start using class averages. And as soon as you start using class averages, then kids worry about the percentages. I tried this year something different. I wasn't giving them a percent. I was giving them a comment that matched their report card. For example, I would state that they were "meeting expectations," or "exceeding expectations," or "beginning to meet expectations." That was the only mark they would see on many assignments. The kids would always ask, "What is my mark?" I would tell them that they were meeting the criteria we have set, or not. You have done everything required to meet the criteria we set out. They still ask, "But is that an 80%, or what?" We have even discussed that "exceeding" would place them between high eighties and one hundred [percent]. They still wanted to know, "what did I get?"*

JM: *I am getting the sense that you tend to be a little more of a humanities and literature type person.*

SP: *Yes, language arts, those types of things. I haven't become super creative in math, yet. I suppose that with our new textbooks next year that there may be ways for me to stretch myself with math assessments. For example, we may move from a multiplication test to have the kids model strategies with manipulatives. I think that is [a limitation] of my creativity with it. I could see other teachers who would refuse to do any kind of alternative assessment. It really depends on the person.*

It comes as no surprise to me that there is a tendency to revert back to familiar habits when one is uncomfortable. SP is a teacher who is comfortable, to a certain extent, with formative assessment and student-involved assessment, particularly in subject areas of strength. For the social sciences and humanities, ELA and social studies, she took up formative assessment and student involved assessment. For math, she struggled to see how to do this. Here, there is a propensity to revert back to giving a grade or mark in a subject area in which the teacher has less comfort. Just as one's ethnicity influences worldview, a teacher's experience with subject areas or FA will influence the selection of assessment strategies. FA or a percentage, worksheet or project-based task?

While SP works with previous students' work to develop assessment criteria with current students, some other interesting things are happening. There is a linkage to the progress report deliberately being made with the students. This partially addresses the concerns RV and DF had expressed. SP still refers to percentages even when asking students what they can do to make their projects better. An effort is on SP's part to steer the students to a realization that the percentage attained is not important, but a self-reflection on the student's part is required. This is difficult for kids because they need to be taught how to be reflective in their learning and once we provide a mark, then the learning episode is over and any chance to apply what was learned may be lost.

Another interesting thing to note is that although many teachers like to share and take new assessment ideas back to their schools after professional development sessions, SP earlier shared that many colleagues are reliant on a pencil and paper test to provide assessment data. This approach, however, likely leads to a quantified reporting strategy and therefore reinforces

that the percentage is the most important part of the progress report and not the diagnostic comments.

JE shares thoughts on what grades mean. For students in elementary schools a strange dichotomy exists among grades and being promoted from one grade level to the next. Kids can get promoted without even showing up. JE's comments reflect experiences as a teacher and parent. The following dialogue reflects JE's son's experiences and JE's own experiences.

JE: ... But for your average student who wants to go through the system and have as many open doors as they want, those grades aren't that important. And especially in grade nine, they become less important except maybe in that there is some talk about this change between the idea of failing and not failing. You know that in grade eight we don't really fail students. But then in grade nine they are able to fail students in terms of 'you did not complete grade nine math, so you cannot go onto grade ten math until you complete grade nine math.' So students could be stuck in that particular subject for a while until they figure out how to get through it. But, other than that, those grades don't really mean anything.

JM: Is a sense of competition being influenced by his (JE's son) peer group? Because he is at that age where his peers are going to have typically more influence over him and his decisions than his parents will. So is he being influenced by some falsehoods that surround assessment that have permeated his peer group?

JE: *There is that for sure. When you get kids who do not want to be in “Read to Succeed” which is the special program for kids who are struggling with language arts, because they do not want to be seen as dumb. What I find fascinating in my community school is the kids – my Read to Succeed kids are smart, they have just gotten caught in the cracks of the programming, so they do not fit the assessment that is being done. So I will give them a project that does not fit the assessment scheme of old. And they do great. I have had these kids get 100% on a fraction test and on a geometry test with some help. Because I do not do assessment like I used to. Here is your test, you get no help, you cannot call a friend, and you have no lifelines. Away you go. They have typically bombed those types of tests. But these boys, because they are in read to succeed, they are exempted from science and social studies and these assignments are coming due. I am trying to put together final grades, and I am putting some pressure on them to motivate them to get some work done. I have one of my smart guys ask, “how do I get into this read to succeed class?” Another student replied, “You gotta act dumb for a while.”*

What is interesting is that JE is providing some differentiated instruction and assessments in response to student need. This is precisely what I think we should do with all students. What is also interesting is that despite a recognition that some kids benefit greatly from changing assessment and instructional strategies, teachers are still under pressure to come up with final grades. I also feel that kids asking each other how they can participate in alternative assessment

practices to be a strong indicator that the students are ready to embrace a change to our assessment practices. Students who are not receiving significant program modification recognize the support and guidance received by “Read to Succeed” students as beneficial but possibly unfair. One student receives a different assessment, additional help and then a progress report indicates that they may appear to be stronger than they really are under the rubric of a more traditional or purely summative assessment scheme. This a form of proofiness.

Proofiness is “using bogus mathematical arguments to prove something you know in your heart is true – even when it is not” (Seife, 2010, p.4). In this case, it is a disestimation. “Disestimation is the act of taking a number too literally, understating or ignoring the uncertainties that surround it. Disestimation imbues a number with more precision than it deserves, dressing a number up as absolute fact instead of presenting it as the error prone estimate it really is” (Seife, p. 23). In other words, there is a number attached to the student evaluation that is generated in good faith, but the reality is that the number may actually misrepresent the achievement and student learning.

Our conversation took a turn that tried to shed light on how teachers can address the discrepancy among learners so we can more accurately report student learning.

JM: How then do we take our assessments and what our initial learning objectives are and put those aside and allow the kids to share what they have learned and really demonstrate to the kids that what they have learned is authentic? What you have learned is real, it has meaning and relevance and value even if the only value is you thought it was cool. Or, it was something that you did not know and now you have this knowledge. How do we do that? I would love to have a kid say to me, “I

don't fully understand the seven patterns of culture, but here is what I have learned."

JE: Do you know what just struck me now as I was talking about it, is how important assessment is. You know what the problem is with assessment for me? It is the collecting of the data. It is not that I want to have genuine learning experiences with kids. I want them to think about how they learned. This last class, the thing I (the student) have learned is going to benefit me in life. I (the student) am going to learn something.

JE made a great point. Data collection is a problem. Our division touts itself to be data driven. Anyone probably would not argue against collecting and analyzing data and basing one's decisions on these. But our reality is that the kids we teach really do not get to see the data and therefore make sound educational decisions. And we are supposed to be a data driven organization. How can we expect kids to reflect and decide what is next for their learning if we do not involve them in this process? Further to that, when we consider the culture of grades and marks it easy to see that kids want to move on as soon as a project is complete. I would also argue that as teachers in that absence of appropriate pre-service training, professional development, and support that we are just as likely to make poor interpretations of the data as students are. This will further reinforce the culture of marks just as SP and others tell us they are not likely to use FA in those subject areas not in their area of expertise.

What is also difficult for me to grasp when discussing the rationale for quantifying student learning, is that as a division, we have no consistent approach to what data we collect, how it gets collected, and what is included from that data when writing progress reports. I had a student transfer from one school across town to my grade eight class. Records in the cumulative

file indicated she was a very strong student academically. She was, in reality, a student who appeared strong among a group of students generally functioning below grade level. This revelation was, for her parents, not an easy thing to hear. It did not make me a popular person. I am not advocating standardized testing, but there are holes in the manner in which we collect assessment data and then disseminate it. One way to address this problem would be to assess a student portfolio against a set of sample pieces of student work from across the division. In this manner it may be possible to state where a student really is relative to the curriculum objectives rather than on the assignment qualities. It also allows a student who is new to a school the benefit of a less biased examination of their abilities.

Some great questions arose from this discussion with JE. Of primary concern was data collection and whose data it really was.

JE: And assessment for administrators and for report cards is about the data you can collect. Whereas for me, the assessment is, or what it should be, is an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned and use it to make course corrections. We could say to a student, "Ok, you are not good at this, what do we need to do to get better at it?" For some people it is avoiding data at all costs and for others it is a case where they need help with a learning objective. I was thinking about the collecting of that data, and how that becomes another one of our management issues. It is exactly like that camp episode I described earlier. The kids learned a whole bunch. How do I assess it? The other question is why do I need to assess it? Why do I need to collect the data on what they have learned from camp? Because really it is their data. They are going to be using it

for their lives. Those lessons that I have given to them are a gift. Take them and use it and enjoy life. But we are still caught up in this whole thing, right? We have to produce report cards, we have learning objectives to meet and we need to be able to say, "Yes they can or cannot do this objective."

JM: Are we too hung up on proving that whatever it is we do during the course of a day, week or month has to be demonstrated?

JE: *Absolutely. My V.P. asked me, "Do you think some of your kids do not attend school because of your program and what you are doing?" My response was to state that he knew better than I did what the kids in my community would respond to. But when I look at my kids in my classroom that are not coming to school, they have a variety of things going on in their lives that have nothing to do with me. Or, if it has something to do with me it is not the fact that I am their teacher.*

JM: Do you mean as an agent of the system?

JE: *...Right at the end there I was thinking that when we think about assessment as teachers we are really just thinking about data collection. The assessment is "can you prove that a person has learned the lessons that you have been teaching?" Whenever I hear that it is an instinct I have that makes me respond with a definitive, "Absolutely not." There is no way that I can prove that anyone has learned anything from any of my lessons. But I can kind of find some numbers in some sort of process that makes it look like I can. That is what I am thinking.*

JE's comments make me feel as if we are collecting data to justify what we are doing in our classrooms. JE is describing our current approach toward teaching as being more of a science and what it needs to become is more of an art. But his sentiment about the data collection getting in the way of student learning is on point.

JE also makes reference to students being promoted from one grade to the next without having the necessary competencies to succeed at the next grade level. This seems to echo DF and RV and their sentiments about ability level groupings rather than an age-based grouping.

Further complicating the implementation of true formative assessment practices is my belief that the parents of our students have not come to fully understand the benefits of these practices. I think of the conversations I have with my daughter during our homework sessions and how I try to help her understand she is improving at particular aspects of her schoolwork. At subsequent sessions, I try to have her recall what she had done previously so she can replicate something good or improve on poor performance. My wife has a tendency to push for getting everything right the first time. I can't help but feel even we are providing a conflicted message to our daughter.

JG shares some of this frustration in trying to work with parents.

JM: You mentioned parents earlier. Are you running into any significant resistance from parents when you use these formative assessment strategies? You mentioned that they want to see the mark and the class average and don't seem to be particularly interested in the curriculum objective based comments on report cards and other reporting documents.

JG: *In my experience, parents do not seem to be interested in how kids are assessed; they are concerned with the percentage at the end of the term. Next year we are going to be more conscious of informing parents about the new math program that is coming. There has been a lot of resistance to the Nelson math program at our school. This is because the idea is to concentrate more on process and they (the parents) are products of the pencil and paper school of math. They want to see the algorithms, and kids memorizing their multiplication tables, here is the assignment, go do it. Now, there is some value to some of that stuff, but there is lots of resistance to the process based and language based approach to mathematics. I actually wanted to try a “mark less” math class. I might be a year or two away from that, but it is a goal to go “mark less” in a subject area, and to see what the parent reaction would be. There needs to a lot of communication with that.*

JM: There is a guy in high school who does a grade nine math class that is “mark less”. He says that it has worked very well for those kids who struggle.

JG: *You show that kid that they have failed a test, and they continue to struggle. If you go “mark less,” then to them all they need to do is master that concept. They can take the time they need to do it. The pressure for me, as a teacher, is to deliver the curriculum in its entirety and not what we deem to be important. So, I still feel that I am being pulled both ways on that issue. You are legally responsible for delivering*

the curriculum, and you know that that is doing a disservice to about one-third of your class. The challenge is going to be in finding out how to condense the curriculum into big ideas, and to focus on those because that is how change will occur when we spend some time looking at this. Otherwise it will be same old, same old.

The time constraint rears its ugly head again. But, if we can convince the parents of our students that formative assessments are a more valuable learning strategy, then we may have traction. I wonder how many students in my classes have been so strongly influenced by their parents' perceptions we teachers do not know what we are doing. I have had countless conversations with parents trying to convince them that the final grade is not what is important but, their child's disposition toward school and learning is of greater significance. JG seems to make an attempt to change teaching so students can benefit from best practice by trying to change parental perception.

DF and RV shared insight earlier regarding their perceptions of parental expectations regarding percentages and using AFL to generate percentages. What has puzzled me for over a decade now, is that not one parent has asked me how these averages are derived. I honestly believe that quite literally, one could make them up or, as DF suggested earlier, throw them down the stairs and see upon which step the assignments landed and use that as reporting data.

I have also had some interesting experiences with school principals for reporting class averages. I had a group of students not at all motivated to complete any work. It was early in my career and I depended upon worksheets and that activity. When I wrote in a class average around 35%, I was prevented from including this on my students' progress reports. At the direction of the principal, who had received direction from a superintendent, the class average was later

included after the progress reports had been issued. This was a crucial event in steering me to student assessment as an area of interest. Shouldn't the families of my students know exactly what the class average was? Shouldn't there have been a conversation about what the poor class average represented? Absolutely. Was there such a conversation? No. There were definitely no such conversations with parents at the start of the school year about student assessment.

DF shares another example of parental pressure creating some interference with formative assessment work. There is a genuine attempt to create assessment criteria with the kids and use that to directly create a set of marks that are meaningful to the student, teacher and parents.

DF: By grade seven they already know – we need to include mechanics, content and appearance. So you can shortcut some of those aspects. I think that a lot of teachers have been doing this forever, anyway. Maybe not the complete AFL but a lot of teachers have used this marking scale for kids. We have the freedom to omit parts as well. For example, I may omit mechanics. But we may focus on content. Then you have to expand upon that. It can be very helpful in that regard. Again, it is really hard, and I find the pressure more so with grades six, seven and eight. When I was teaching grade five, I did not have that pressure to come up with marks (marks do not appear on report cards until grade six). If you put a kid on a rubric and they got four, or a one, and I have always put four at the top (highest level), then to try and translate those into marks and to put them on a report card and then to have to justify those marks is really tough. We will still then have the parents wanting to know what

the class average is. Where does my kid fit? What did he not hand in?

What did he not do? Whereas, in grade five if you gave a kid a four on an

assignment using a rubric, they were excited because that was the top.

Or they would say, “I got two fours and next time I will do this...(to

improve)” They did not care about averages, and performance

indicators like that.

It is difficult for me to see the need for schools to take the unnecessary step to add grades. I get even more confused when parents and students put so much stock in those grades. DF is right when we have young students genuinely excited about doing well on portions of an assignment and then having the innate ability to decide what the next step toward improvement should be. We take all of the positive energy and excitement for learning and risk slowing the momentum by wanting to know where our kids fit.

SP had some comments that indicated parents were pleased with the change in assessment philosophy for some students. SP still used percentage grades despite what the following statement may lead the reader to think. SP was reiterating what JG cited earlier about the benefits of conferencing with students and having a better understanding of what they are really learning. It would be interesting to conference with parents to see what they are learning about school when their kids are as engaged as SP's students seem to be.

JM: Have you run into any feedback from parents? Good, bad or indifferent about this type of alternative assessment strategy? And I am only using the term “alternative” because it seems to be different from what we have all grown up with, right?

SP: *Nobody has come to me and talked about my use of report card comments instead of marks. I have however, had parents come to me about the different kinds of assessment I am trying that are not formal test type assessments.*

JM: Right.

SP: *They are generally thrilled to see what kinds of things their kids are producing. The parents will say things like, "I have seen them working on this at home and he won't stop." They seem to see it as taking it further and it is more beneficial than a test. However, I have done both. I want them to see the tests, of course. Because when they get into high school you still have to write final exams. But the learning I have seen in these kids and what I can pull from their brains is far beyond a multiple choice or true and false question and even an essay question. It is unbelievable.*

All of the participants seem to work to achieve the same thing. They all want students to develop the disposition that leads them to be autonomous lifelong learners. So far their comments are telling me that the percentage grades we are employing are not really helping matters. If there is such a time crunch in delivering a curriculum, perhaps we could free up some time and dispense with this meaningless accounting practice. This is a cultural change we need to undertake. In conversations with other parents and teachers as why they favour a letter grade or a percentage, the reply is that they know "where their kid fits." This is because it is familiar. The interesting part of the conversation arises when I ask them if they know how the marks are generated. Invariably they have no idea. I believe we have student resistance, teacher learning,

and parent response to formative assessment and student involved assessment. It is interesting to note that parents and students all seem to be ultimately concerned with what will appear on the report card. This is a positive attribute of many parents. They want their kids to do well. But what they are really concerned with is the equivalent to low-level criteria on a poster. There is some positive movement here, though. SP shared the anecdote of parents being thrilled to see their children engaged in school-work. What teachers need to do is begin the process of selling FA and student involved assessment to parents in the face of such positive comments. I think we let too many opportunities like this pass by without completing the conversation. It is as if there is a sense of relief on the part of the parent that they are not getting bad news from the teacher, and the teacher is relieved that the parent is not unhappy with them.

Curriculum Content and the Need to Cover Material

Some portions of the conversations turned toward teachers feeling they are under pressure to cover content. This sense of heightened urgency to cover the curriculum comes from both external and internal loci of control. Teachers want their students to have as broad an education as possible, but try to balance that breadth with suitable depth so students understand not only facts but also have a skill set that allows them to use those facts. Often, the pressure to work on a broad, superficial level that promotes the sense of covering the most curriculum possible comes at the expense of sound assessment.

I asked JG about the notion of formative assessment strategies and their impact on a teacher's ability to be creative when delivering curriculum.

JM: Do you find that as you use FA strategies that it forces you to be more creative and renew and to some extent reinvent not necessarily the way you do things, but the products you want students to create?

JG: *I think it makes you think of the end before you teach your unit or lesson. You have to have the end in mind and I think that is very important for teachers and students. And again I can't say that I do it for everything, because it is time consuming and at the end of the day, curriculum being what it is (the need to cover content) you need to get going.*

JM: Do you find that you are pressured to cover a certain amount of content?

JG: *I think that there is too much content. If you are looking at individual objectives, math for example, I think can be broken down into some bigger ideas and we can focus more on getting these kids to learn some big ideas rather than trying to get through those individual objectives in the curriculum guide which is really an impossible task.*

JG echoes what JE stated. Getting through the massive number of objectives within a curriculum document is a Herculean task. Impossible according to JG and a task that according to JE if we could collect appropriate data, we couldn't even state with certainty that our students have learned anything from our lessons. These teachers are not negative people. They are among the best I know. They are passionate about kids and their work. I would have them teach my own children. What they say is refreshingly honest. All they are relating is that we have a curriculum that although well intentioned, is far too cumbersome and broad. The only way to get "through it," as SP remarked, was a pencil and paper approach easy and familiar to parents and students so we fall back on it at the expense of a more formative approach.

JG describes an instance in which a resource has been provided to assist teachers in accomplishing covering an entire grade's math curriculum using a canned program. Even with resources such as this, teachers find it nearly impossible to do justice to the entire curriculum.

JM: I have never ever gone through any of the curriculum guides from start to finish and completed an entire grade eight year. Do you think that it's fair to say that we know that there is not a single grade eight teacher who will? Then based on that knowledge, feel comfortable paring things down to a reasonable level?

JG: *It is already happening to some extent, but what you try to do at the end of the year when you pound through geometry and data management, whatever you have left until the end, you are still trying to cover a little bit of everything so they have seen enough of the curriculum. But we all know that you don't cover everything. So in that regard, the paring down is already happening. But you still feel that responsibility to touch on all of the curriculum objectives. But with the Nelson math program, there are some teachers, with no fault to the teacher, the kids do not understand the language of these books, they are only getting through four or five units out of thirteen in an entire year. This is happening consistently across the board. It is not an isolated situation. I would say that at most, teachers are covering only six or seven units per year. That is slightly better than half of the program. What good is that doing?*

JM: Are they only getting through six units of the Nelson program, but covering other units from the curriculum documents using supplemental resources? (This question was trying to determine if JG knew whether or not teachers were just covering the missing material in a superficial manner at the end of the year.)

JG: *I'm not sure. They have started this program in the younger grades, but we are experiencing a lot of frustration and I think I'll be experiencing some frustration next year when I make the switch over to the Nelson math program. I believe that teachers are using supplementary materials, but they are still not covering enough of the curriculum.*

JE shares another approach to covering the curriculum that may appear to have a formative approach but in reality is several projects contained within one theme. It was supposed to have been a thematic unit, however, what JE describes with the summative scoring at the end is revealing. It shows how onerous school can be for kids unless they sense a real purpose to the tasks at hand.

JE: *My son did this one giant project, and this was, in my opinion, really bad assessment. He got this project where he was to make a five-part thing about the Yukon. Make a poster, make a brochure, write a short story, and create a children's book. It was like this teacher wanted to cover the whole semester or the entire reporting period with this one project. The marking sheet had (approximately) seventy-three marks on it – or some strange number. It (the scoring) was three for this*

(component of the assignment) and two for this and four for this, and so on. I was looking at the sheet wondering if there was a discernable pattern. The answer was no. How does a kid look at this and think, “So the next project I have to do I will work on this (aspect of the project to improve). There was none of that. It simply was do your Yukon project, get your mark and, what? My wife and I put a lot of energy into this because our son is not a hugely artistic person in the sense of drawing and cutting and pasting. He was really stressed about this. So we wanted to help him. Then we ended up doing it with him. I am doing all of the desktop publishing, my wife is doing all of the cut and paste – not all, but we are sitting at the table with him while he is working on the project. We did not put any of the words down but we would prompt him when he wrote a poor statement, with something like, “What does this statement really mean? What would be a better way to say it?” I remember sitting there thinking, “Dear Lord, I hope that I never give one of those (assignments) out to children,” because it was just too cruel.

It is difficult for me to admit I have done exactly this type of project. After hearing JE share his family’s experience with this learning episode, I cannot help but wonder what we are trying to accomplish with our students. This project seems to be little more than an exercise in which a teacher can justify their job by having their students slog through as much of the curriculum as possible as quickly as possible. This is stark contrast to the project regarding women’s health and solar cookers during which my students have the benefit of much formative assessment, conversation and self-reflection to drive their decision making and learning. I no

longer feel compelled to send home a cumbersome project filled with reams of low-level assessment criteria. I feel more confident as a teacher to have students working on more holistic projects.

My approach to teaching and learning has changed since my career began. But now that my own children are in elementary school, I am acutely aware of the artificial urgency to get through the curriculum. My wife and I have become homework buddies for our daughter. Much of my energy in this capacity is trying to get my daughter to understand that the world will not stop revolving if she cannot accomplish something the first time. Further to that, if she falls behind it becomes my job to empower her to speak with her teacher so everyone involved can make adjustments. I see that as part of my job as a parent. Where I differ with JE, is that although we both want our kids to produce accurate and attractive work, I expend more energy trying to get my kids to understand where and how to compartmentalize their learning in relation to the products they make for school.

It is clear teachers are experiencing pressure to not only cover the curriculum , but there exists a pressure to get started. This raises a serious question for me. To what extent are teachers establishing start up routines and procedures? Also of importance is to what degree are students involved in these decisions? If there is pressure to get started, the teacher may have kids jump right into an assignment or lecture with little to no preamble. I have done exactly this understanding that I would be a no nonsense, kind of teacher. The kind parents and administrators would like. The kind students would respect or fear. These teachers have created this pressure of their own accord. They would be less likely to feel such overwhelming stress if time were taken to unpack curriculum, establish routines with students intimately involved in the conversation and communication with parents and administration occurred.

JG and JE both also describe poorly designed assessments, units of study and canned programs being of little assistance. This begs the question, to what extent are teachers placing on designing quality programs of study? Do they know their students or, have they fallen into the trap of pulling out the “September file” and dumping it into a photocopier? I have spoken with friends who are parents of kids my children go to school with. They all seem to love the teachers who have a stack of paper ready to go at a moment’s notice. There is a misunderstanding these teachers are good because of this. They may be good. But I wonder how they can respond to the needs of their students and if they have involved students in any of the educational decision making.

Co-Constructed Criteria (Student-Involved Assessment)

Naturally, conversations with participants included the notion of creating assessment criteria with their students. The participants revealed there were both positive and negative attributes to this process.

JM: Do you think that is something that most people would be receptive to? That idea of giving kids more freedom and opportunity to pick and choose what they want to do and learn?

JG: *The tough thing I am finding is that even with FA and building rubrics with kids and having them take ownership over criteria is that they are used to being force-fed. They are used to us telling them what to do, what the resulting mark is, and what the next assignment is going to be. Now I find that more teachers at my school are doing this but it takes time. You can’t build a rubric for everything you are going to teach. What I have tried to do is to pick certain projects and different styles of*

writing and we focus on building rubrics and creating assessment criteria with the students. As I progress through my career, each year I plan to focus on something new.

JG essentially stated both the present culture of grades and marks and the time constraints are presenting a barrier to the teacher – student relationship for creating assessment criteria. The student often depends upon an external source of feedback. What we really need is a culture in which students and teachers feel free enough to define assessment criteria for their individual learning needs. That is supposed to happen, but when kids are waiting to be force fed, as JG stated, then the teacher will often fall back on one common set of criteria. This happens often in my experience because of time constraints. As SP said, “because it is easy.”

RV and DF shared what kids liked about creating assessment criteria with teachers. There is an implied difference however between the kids who like to be force-fed and the kids who prefer sharing the responsibility of creating assessment criteria.

DF: The kids are good at picking out where they fit on those rubrics. They know within reason where they are. The kids that want to go ahead can because they know what the next logical steps are to move to the next level. Most kids are quite happy to be done “what’s next.” That is a mindset for moving through as well.

RV: There is no denying that when it is that clear cut, they love it. They know exactly what is expected of them. There is nothing subjective about this. There is no chance that they won’t do well if they follow the steps. Considering that in most cases they have helped create those steps, they

have ownership they normally wouldn't have. But you can't necessarily use it for evaluation.

JM: So it falls short on the reporting end of things.

RV: *Yes, but it still a great tool for teaching and for practicing concepts.*

RV: *Now, with that said, it (AFL) is still a very useful tool. In the subject areas I have used it – language arts and social studies, it is very useful for making it very clear exactly what the expectations are, exactly what the students need to do and for the students to take some ownership, because they are able to create their own evaluative tool and they like that. They like knowing that I am going to be marked on this because we decided, that this was important. They do not recognize my hand guiding that all of the time, but it does give them an opportunity for ownership.*

DF: *And when they say you need two sources in your bibliography for a research project, and they do not include two sources, they do not argue about it because they have come up with that.*

RV: *Precisely.*

DF: *Sometimes you have to guide them. Sometimes I trump them. Some of them will be pretty unreasonable. It does help when you do the evaluation with kids. It does help them see that you are not just throwing them down the stairs and then assigning numbers based on the step the assignment falls.*

RV: *They realize that it is objective and not subjective. That it is not a case in which I got 82% because the teacher likes me.*

DF: *Exactly. That is a good point. Or, his was longer and will get a better mark.*

RV: Yes.

DF: *Or, the complaint that another student used a bigger font to make it seem like a longer assignment. Truly we get down to some of the pickiest things when they do rubrics. But that is going to be an expectation when they get further on in the learning process and in their academic careers.*

They describe kids can better understand their efforts will be evaluated on their own merits and not necessarily against another student's work. There is an inherent layer of objectivity with creating and then using assessment criteria. What is critical to understand is there are kids who will do well no matter what the learning environment is like. Others may have parental support that influences their results or perhaps they are intrinsically motivated to do well. RV and DF indicate that students like the transparency this process affords. I agree with their comments. We also need to consider the outliers in this discussion. Those students who have a tendency to see school and learning as a negative regardless of the strategies used by the teacher.

I had a grade eight class one year that were almost entirely driven by being force-fed worksheets. My preferred teaching style by this time had changed to project based learning with open-ended tasks. At one point, about halfway through the school year, one student asked me when we would get some worksheets to do instead of projects. I asked her why she wanted worksheets. Her reply was so she did not have to think as much as she did with project based learning. I subsequently asked the whole class how many wanted worksheets to do. Almost every hand went up.

DF and RV shared an idea about implementing co-constructed assessment criteria that might be a great way to help change the culture of students wanting to be force-fed. They describe the notion using it to report on students and their behaviour. By doing this, they think there may be a way to change the students' disposition toward learning.

DF: I am going to use AFL for behaviour. I have not used it for behaviour in the past. I will use the Fish Philosophy¹ – I am going to set up the rules for the classroom and I am going to set up a rubric and have the kids mark it every week. I will have them assess where they fit on this behavioural continuum each week. I am finding that it is very frustrating on the continuum of behaviour in the grade seven classroom that it has gone down. It started out high and by now it is low. There is no excuse for that, except that the kids don't perceive the decline.

JM: I did something similar to that when we did our aquatics unit. We picked five areas like the change room, pool deck, in the water, and so on, and then had the kids assess how they felt they behaved in those specific areas. It seemed to work pretty well. It would be interesting to see how it works over the course of a school year.

DF: I would be really specific. I would spend several days developing it with the kids. I would have it fairly simple, perhaps four levels. You don't need much progression – you are either talking when the teacher is talking or you are not. Are you facing forward...I would let the kids work that one out and see what they can come up with. I am always learning

¹ A conscious decision to think of others and their needs ahead of one's own. Essentially, choosing to be positive and by extension enable others around you to feel and act the same way.

and assessing what I do. (Chuckles). I see the advantages in doing that with the class.

RV: Especially with student behaviour. They would take more ownership over that if they have helped to create it. They would buy into it.

DF: Then I will tell the kids that this is what I will use for the front page of your report card and you are going to have to fill it in every week and I'll keep track of it. The kids are their own hardest critics. If you have them do an actual evaluation, probably half of them are harder on themselves than the teacher would be. Then there are those who have the totally inflated, way out of line, ideas. So it would be good to see if they can be realistic and be real about where they fit. I don't think that some are wearing the right glasses.

By having the students involved in assessing their own behaviour, it may be possible to create a learning environment in which students are less inclined to rely on passive feedback. They may begin to see themselves as autonomous learners, rather than a 70% student. Teachers may be more inclined to use assessments that involve students in the establishment of the criteria on a more consistent basis. So far all of the participants have stated that teachers and students are not all that comfortable in this arena. One likely set of reasons may be that it is challenging for students to be given such control and for teachers to let some of the control go. The only way to increase that comfort is to do more and more of this work.

JE has also had a variety of experiences with involving students in the establishment of assessment criteria. Below are two contrasting examples.

JM: So, it would probably be a neat time for me to ask to what extent do you involve the kids in designing assessment strategies and assessment criteria?

JE: *Theoretically, I try and involve them all the time. But when I ask for their involvement I get a huge variety of light bulbs coming on. When we did video production and digital story telling I tied assessment into things they know and do outside of school. When they are able to get a handle on it they say, "I know what I like, I know what is good, I know what looks good, I know what sounds good," they are able to articulate that stuff and I write it on the board. Then I'll say, "let's look for this." We did not do the assessment of digital storytelling for a grade. For me it was an experiment in understanding how to do it (digital storytelling) and not have it tied into their language arts marks so that those marks would be dragged down. I was concerned that technical difficulties would unfairly penalize a student. But on the other hand, I got some really good authentic assessment from them. For example, "I really like this because it was well written and the kids were funny." And, "I could hear everything really well." But when I do other things and I say, "we are going to design a house and we are putting it on grid paper, what are we looking for?" They give me these blank stares. I am looking for elements such as the door, walls, and rooms. I struggle with how to convince them they have something to contribute.*

It really seems that kids are most comfortable in working with co-constructed criteria when little pressure is on them; that is, if the stakes are low. JE did not want his inexperience to hinder student achievement, or more accurately, how he would report that achievement in a percentage. That is fair. But, the bigger question is, what do those grades mean? There is no subject called “video making” on the report card. If this cannot be lumped in with a curriculum objective and its associated reporting, then where does it fit? Not that JE is wasting anyone’s time and that what is being done isn’t valuable. The students could assess each other’s products within parameters. What does it say about kids and their ability to consider what should be included in assessment criteria for a pencil and paper assignment? It tells me we have a great deal of work to do to empower our students into more complete learners.

There are positive and negative attributes to using co-constructed criteria with students. The negative aspects are few but present significant impediments to both the students and teacher. Time is a very significant pressure that prevents effective implementation. Students and teachers also may have a desire to move on to different learning episodes as they tire from a continual process of revision.

The positive attributes are that the students actually must become thinkers. They must diagnose their strengths and weaknesses and make the changes. Guidance from the teacher is essential, and this can only help to strengthen student-teacher relationships. Co-constructed criteria can be used successfully in all aspects of school life that require assessment and reporting. It would be best used when combined with academic subjects and a behavioural component. In this way the student may make the connection between their actions and academic achievements.

Class Size / Time

Another recurring theme the participants felt was of significance was time. This section will also look at time as it relates to class size, or the number of students in a class.

JG provides details about one such class. In Saskatoon Public Schools, elementary school encompasses kindergarten through grade eight. There are great attributes to having one class of students to work with. But at the same time, some real challenges accompany this arrangement.

JG: I have twenty-nine kids. That is another issue – class size. To do any really valuable formative assessment I think that to have twenty-nine kids in your class does the process a disservice as well. At the end of the day you may want to have done more formative assessment, but you sometimes just have to get those marks. They have to be on the report cards and they have to go home to the parents. Here is your test, and here is your mark. I find that happens especially in mathematics when you are slugging through a whole bunch of stuff. You really just need to get that mark and to be able to back up that mark with some tests. But, for me to sit and conference with twenty-nine kids about math when I am trying to also conference about reading...you cannot do it for all subject areas. That is, unless, of course, you happen to have a bunch of extra time, and we do not.

JM: Yeah. And at the grade eight level you have just about everything going on. So are you teaching everything with the exception of French and band?

JG: *That's right.*

JM: So if you look at it, I think that is about ten or eleven different subject areas you are responsible for?

JG: *Yes. So what I have been doing is to pick and choose when you can co-construct rubrics and set assessment criteria. I really make a conscious effort to do that as much as possible. There are excuses for everything and you would like to do it more often but the reality is at the end of the day you simply do not have the time. So what I am trying to do this year with the Literacy for Life initiative was to use the couple of half days for professional development was to research our inquiry question. So I took that time and I did my reading conferences with kids. I tried to do one each reporting period and to be honest you can learn more about a kid's reading in a ten minute conference than I did in a whole year. It is just amazing that we do not do more of this and we are not given the opportunity to more of this type of thing because it just so valuable.*

One of the most telling statements in this exchange is that there are so many students in one classroom this becomes another form of pressure directed at the teacher. It seems as if the screws are tightened, the teacher feels pressured to deliver more and then the teacher is then compelled to prove that students have met those requirements. JG mentions giving students' tests to accomplish covering curriculum, providing a grade and therefore a justification for the marks on the report card. This according to JG comes at the expense of what is valuable – conferencing with students.

JM: This is a continuation of my interview with a confidential informant.

We were discussing the idea of spending as much time as possible co-

creating rubrics, but that you also need to get on with the delivery of content as well. You mentioned that (the learning) process was important but, again finding the time when you have twenty-nine kids to sit down and interview each one for ten minutes, that is 290 minutes just for that one activity alone. In some subject areas that is your weekly allotment of minutes. For example, I believe that math is 300 minutes per week.

JG: You must try to find the time because they (student conferences) are a valuable activity. If we weren't so focused on percentages and getting that mark on their report card, you can find the time to do it. Maybe not for everything, but pick one or two subjects per term and spend five minutes with a kid and you (the teacher) will learn a lot more than if you took in a test or an assignment (for assessment).

When pressed for a concise opinion regarding formative assessments in school, over a reasonable time frame, this will become part of JG's arsenal. However, there needs to be a shift in our current assessment culture.

JM: In a nutshell , in your opinion, formative assessment and student involved assessment strategies, are these something you are going to continue with over the long haul? Is that the way that assessments need to go?

JG: I think that FA is beneficial and I will continue to add to my assessment repertoire each year. It is important that as teachers we do not remain stagnant. The way that school division and the province are viewing assessment and student involvement is great. I am sticking with

it. There are obvious challenges but, you need to do what you are comfortable doing but add to it each year. You cannot jump in completely in your first year. That is why people find new things so overwhelming. That is why there is a lot of resistance to the changes that are occurring. If you take a bit at a time, and build upon that, you see the value in FA, involving the students in their assessments, and having the end in sight. There are still times when you need to give the students a summative evaluation. Challenges like class size, and time will dictate that you cannot do everything using FA. It is impossible with our present structure.

RV supports JG's assertion that our present structure is not conducive to creating a climate of such radical change. Teachers, students, administrators, the Ministry of Education, and especially families, need to be included.

JM: Is that program and AFL, then, something that would be better suited for teachers who are not doing elementary or middle school the way we do it where you teach 13 different subjects to the same group of kids? Would that be better for a...?

RV: *A specialist. I suspect so.*

Like RV and DF, JG feels that the present structure of our elementary school system in Saskatoon is not conducive to implementing an effective formative assessment philosophy. Time, parental understanding, culture and divisional supports are not sufficient. Our reality is that we have a tendency to promote the latest literature and attempt to espouse the best practices. However, we fall short on the most important facet of education – student assessment. We must

follow up on what we believe to be the best practice by implementing those techniques throughout the entire school system.

RV and DF indicate there is hope in finding the time once teachers and students commit themselves to undertaking using formative assessments.

JM: What about time? That was one of the other issues that came up. The time that is required to teach kids how to establish assessment criteria, and the time to practice it.

RV: *If you follow the process to the letter and you go through all of the brainstorming first, then you introduce your models, both good and poor, and you dissect those to establish what makes a good piece of writing , for example, you then also categorize those criteria – you are looking at hours. It is just not possible. But of course, what ends up happening is that the kids end up short cutting that process themselves. If this is the fifth time that you are creating a rubric for a writing assignment, they get pretty good at remembering that they need to include mechanics, for example. They will know that this includes capitalization, punctuation, spelling and grammar.*

DF: *And general categories. The kids (DF's students) have a general rubric they all use for reader's response journals and personal journals. Unless I go back and review those rubrics every time I don't find that the kids are using them as much as they should.*

RV: *Do they have to create them every time?*

DF: *Not every time. We will do one at the beginning of the year for each.*

Then I hope that each time we did a reader's response that the kids would all refer back to the appropriate rubric. We will periodically revisit the rubrics to make appropriate changes. So for some of the standard types of assignments we are using, I let the kids evaluate themselves. If it is something special like a research poster, then we will do that separately. But you are right, it takes a ton of time. And I don't get into the categorization with them. I often do that for them.

RV: *That is often where I will take short cuts.*

What DF and RV are indicating is that once establishing assessment criteria has taken place and students have seen how it works, then teachers can shorten the criteria establishment process as it becomes part of the classroom routine. Teachers will not have to look at what qualities make particular student work a good example or a poor example. Students will have learned those qualities, and can then more automatically include that into their work. The difficulty lies in that we are not consistently taking any formative assessment approach in the school division and therefore are not making the cultural change that seems necessary.

Student Motivation

One attribute of successful people surely has to be motivation. When I work with students I hope for them to succeed. One retired educator told me that his goal for his students was for them to turn out to be personally happy and socially useful which sounds like another way to say successful. When my interviews turned to the notion of formative assessment affecting student motivation, some interesting revelations were brought forth.

JM: Do you find that student motivation is improved when you use formative assessment techniques and get the students involved in the assessment strategies?

JG: *I think that it is so new to the students that they are still trying to figure it out. But they do like seeing what they need to achieve before they start learning about it. It is important to realize that many of us used to begin units without having any idea of what the end of the unit should be like. I often had no idea, let alone the students. At a conference I attended , it was stated that if they can see the target, then the students will be more likely to hit it, or some quote to that effect. That seems to make sense, but there are some kids who, and you can give them all of the assessment criteria you want to, are still going to give you the same crap (poor quality products or performance). Maybe the motivation to be in school for them is not there regardless of what we do. I think that for the students who are already engaged, they definitely appreciate seeing that target, and then they know what they need to do.*

I am reading into what JG is saying about motivation is that teachers have two competing pressures influencing students to perform or not. Time and culture have already been mentioned. What is interesting is JG's assertion that kids are being left to their own devices more frequently than ever. When combined with the restrictions present at schools, there is little wonder that many students will be less motivated to do well at school. If given the choice of making another Bristol board poster for a class presentation or immersing oneself in the latest online video game, what choice is there?

Another interesting thing revealed is that given our present structure, there is likely to be little change in student motivation during a school year. DF and RV indicate there is a small group of students committed to doing well regardless of the teaching style. It seems at this point to be a means to guide these independent learners.

DF: AFL can support what we are doing. I just don't want to dump everything else that we are doing. You cannot do it (AFL) with thirty-two kids in the classroom. It is designed for the altruistic kids who are intrinsically motivated to do well and get better. In thirty-three years of teaching, we have always done that. What you hope these kids are going to leave your classroom with is the fact that they will be lifelong learners. They are going to be able to move through a learning process. Well, guess what? That doesn't happen. The reality is that are only two or three in this class (students in this year's class) who fit that profile. So the AFL is great. We set it up so that the kids who want to enrich themselves can just go and work with the AFL.

RV: It is unsupervised structure for those who want to do well. It gives them the tools. It gives them the steps. It gives them the structure.

DF: Yes.

RV: And, lots of kids love that structure. But you are right the ones who love that structure and respond to it are already motivated. But if Freddy is not motivated...

DF: If he is not motivated by the marks, then he is not likely to be motivated by moving through the learning process either.

It is interesting to note that RV and DF have an opinion that differs from Stiggins (1999). Stiggins would assert that formative assessments level the playing field and would narrow the learning gap for students who may not be motivated to do well. Perhaps beginning implementing formative assessments would be best served by using behaviour as the introductory vector.

JE shared an anecdote during which there was an opportunity for student autonomy, a teacher conference with the students.

JE: When we did a culture fair at our school... I would walk up to students and say, "So, tell me about this steel drum." This one particular student had a steel drum. She was not a big attender (had attendance issues) then all of a sudden, she shows up with this great presentation including this steel drum.

"My uncle made it," she said.

I followed up with, "How did he make it?"

She replied, "I don't know."

"He just gave it to you and he did not tell you anything about it?" I asked.

"Nope," she replied.

Ok, that is really useful to have around your display. So what else can you tell me about your culture ...

JM: A steel drum – a great addition to your Norway display.

JE: (laughs). And the Viking helmet also complements the Jamaica display. I went around and asked a few kids who had produced some things that were really interesting. Those kids were interested in it. And

because of their interest, they had paid attention to some of the stuff (content and process) that had transpired (during the project) and they could explain that. On the other hand, I have always wondered when I ask kids questions as a teacher, how intimidated are they by me as I am talking to them? So I am always trying to figure out a way to get them “un-intimidated” and sharing what they have learned.

JM: So what is about the school process that intimidates kids?

JE: At one point, I think it is because they are afraid about finding out what they are really bad at it. They don't know what they are really good at yet. They are developing that sense of I am really good at this. But in the meantime they don't want to have any disastrous experiences. Like my son will work his tail off to get that good mark in grade nine. What does that mark mean? I keep saying that to him. Like if you got a 60 on it (shoulder shrugs) who cares?

JM: What does it mean when he gets to grad school?

JE: It doesn't mean – it means even less then. There is a way that high school builds that whole need for marks. So that by grade twelve those marks really determine the number of open doors you have or the number of dollars you get in your scholarship, or whatever it is. There is some sort of price attached to marks as you approach grade twelve. And so, it is clear that in grade eight, especially for him, in a high socio-economic status neighbourhood, the grade eight marks race was reinforced by the teaching staff. The staff was saying this stuff. He would

come home and ask if it was true that your marks determine your high school placement – that your marks will determine what high school you can go to and what classes you can take. And one day he came home and asked, “Dad, is this true?” I said no. That is not true. It will influence people’s suggestions to you. It will influence whether they say you should go to City Park or I think you should go to Nutana, or we think you should take modified programming. It will influence that conversation and that opinion, but it will not influence where you actually go. Those marks will not do that because it is all based on parental choices. The school division here is very sensitive to what parents want for their kids, so they are not going to say, “No, you cannot come here.” If a parent wants his child to come somewhere unless it is a limited number program like the outdoor school or the media school or ACTAL, something like that where they can actually say that there is no more room, but you can go here.

This exchange was very interesting because it revealed one possible reason for kids to remain aloof and disinterested in school. They are afraid of failure. I am not sure exactly where this fear has come from, but JE is right and I see that manifested every day at school. Much of my energy is spent convincing kids it is perfectly acceptable to have a disastrous experience at school. Not that I want students to do poorly or that I set them up for failure. Rather great deal can be learned from one’s failures. If kids cannot do this at school and feel safe, where can they possibly have this learning experience? I hope the individuals with whom I have placed my trust

have experienced failure and by extension possess the tools to prevent it, for example airline pilots and building contractors.

JE also revealed something else. There appears to be misinformation circulating about the way marks and standardized test results are used. It sounds like, in his experience, that teachers, students, administrators and parents have been complicit in poorly communicating for what purposes grades and test scores are used. Are we then surprised when our kids demonstrate a lack of motivation for their schoolwork?

JM: So then my question about all of that is, do you find that your assessment strategies serve to motivate your students to want to learn? Whatever you do in a class, or could ideally do in a class, do you think assessment can play a role in motivating kids?

JE: *It definitely can motivate kids. But the question is, does it motivate them to action or to learning? Honestly I find that it motivates them to movement. You know the stereotypical scene where the guys are standing around leaning on their shovels chatting? Then the boss pulls up in the truck and that suddenly becomes movement. We have the kids with their books and their hands up in the air and because I am getting a mark I had better do something. Like you said, they will have the jot notes and other items written down but have they internalized and processed and done something with that so that it becomes a meaningful fact.*

JE: *We can collect data from an experience but is that something that will mean something in two days from now let alone a year from now? This whole notion of becoming a good citizen. When I first started I*

worked with a teacher and I was grouping my students into four groups, and he packaged and described how he ran his classroom because he constantly had students coming back to say that they learned so much about fairness, group work. Those were the lessons those kids walked away with. I find it interesting because I have often thought of assessment as “that duty.” To collect data based on an assignment you have given in the hopes that students will use the information to improve in the future is the goal. But is that really the most meaningful thing that is happening there? Because I’ll bet it is probably not the most meaningful learning that is going on. But that doesn’t fit into the curriculum either, right?

This may have been the most interesting question for me to hear. Does FA motivate kids to learning or to movement? JE asked a very difficult question. I believe that if we were to honestly answer that question, many teachers would conclude that we motivate our students to little more than compliance. It again becomes a hollow justification for the shallow coverage of the curriculum. As a teacher I become like the student – only achieving what is required. I will bet that the kids see this and their response is perfectly reasonable given our own inability to answer such poignant questions. I am of the opinion that teachers will have difficulty responding to a question such as; what is the true purpose of school?

After completing the data analysis and subsequent write up, it has become clear that we require a substantial change to our assessment philosophy. While it is possible to infer that teachers may be of like minds, there is a disconnect when we include administration and parent voices to the conversation. Most teachers and administrators will agree that formative assessment

approaches are the best practice. However, for instituting a real change such as removing a numerical score from the grading process, most people respond as if they were deer caught in headlights.

I feel that the barriers to implementing a sound formative assessment philosophy we have identified have been examined before. Class size and student motivation present many other discussions about educational reform. It seems then, what we really ought to do is have stakeholders identify why we hold the summative grade in such high regard. Once we can point out its folly, then we can reasonably argue in favour of adopting a formative approach.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The focus of this study is on the extent to which 5 middle years teachers are using formative assessment. Specifically, the three research questions are:

1. What do five middle years teachers believe about formative assessment strategies and student involved assessment?
2. What are the perceptions these five teachers hold about students, parents and the community at large with respect to student involved assessment strategies?
3. What methods do these teachers suggest for giving teachers voice to call out this crucial initiative?

Many aspects of kindergarten to grade eight education have been clarified in this study. Of primary concern to this study have been the complexities that comprise student assessment.

Chapter 4 identified six main themes or barriers to the successful integration of formative assessment. These themes were;

- Curriculum content and need to cover material,
- Culture of marks / grades,
- Student motivation,
- Professional development,
- Class size and time, and
- Co-constructed criteria.

These six themes when considered together reveal deficiencies in our adoption and integration of formative assessment. The defined barriers identify systematic weaknesses further reinforce or hamper the ability of educators to successfully integrate FA. The very nature of the six themes confirms that these five teachers believe that formative assessment and student-involved

assessment are not valued yet in their school division. The ability to integrate formative assessment and student-involved assessment successfully into the classroom is essential if we are to create learners who grow to become socially useful and personally happy. This has become a circular and endemic problem. Deliberate and purposeful action must correct it.

At this point it is necessary to have a working definition of formative assessment. Formative assessment is active. Formative assessment is the demonstration by students they can act upon descriptive feedback to show they have achieved a learning outcome regardless of mode (oral, written, performance, etc.). It is not important to focus on the how it is achieved but rather what they are achieving or demonstrating. This aspect will also present both teacher and student with a clear demonstration of a student's competence.

What is missing from this definition is agreement on the definition. Without agreement or acceptance we will never achieve consensus on the actions required to effect change. There will still be people who believe that standardized testing is the best approach to measuring students' learning outcomes. However, if we can find common ground regarding a definition of FA, then we may be able agree other fundamental issues that also must be addressed.

In my view the fundamental issues that plague our schools are broad complex ideas. I am not sure that we can adequately address the purpose of kindergarten to grade twelve education or schooling. What is our intended product? Some may find the term product inappropriate when used with people, but we produce learners or people who have learned measure of the kindergarten to grade twelve curriculum. This point leads me to another fundamental question. That is, are we capable as a society of recognizing learning that is not "achievement" as the primary goal of education? Examples of achievement in this sense could include memorization of facts and posters with low-level assessment criteria. I believe since society and knowledge are

changing quickly, learning to learn is the primary goal. For example, formative assessment and student involved assessment are primary contributors to students learning how to learn. Thus, in the following discussion, I explore how to connect the six themes with a goal of school as students learning how to learn.

When the six themes are considered with respect to the two fundamental questions relating to our product, recognition of learning to learn versus achievement and the purpose of education and schooling, it is clear to me that we have much work to do.

When we consider changes to our practices in education, particularly broad and fundamental changes, it should be understood that the Provincial Ministry of Education is to be involved. Our actions and the content we teach are legislated, so for all of the discussion from this point forward, the Ministry should be a key stakeholder. Appreciating the inherent challenges with changes at the government level, I am more focused on two groups with whom I can directly affect change: the College of Education and the teachers with whom I work.

I favour an approach that works from the grassroots upward and not the other way. Many of our practices emanate from the top and work their way down to classroom teachers. The top may be at the Ministry or it may be at the school board level. Perhaps some initiatives originate at the classroom level, but in my experience, these are few .

I re-examine the six themes with the College of Education in mind and the teachers as a group. I present recommendations and I link an outcome to my initial research question. The six themes will be presented in the same order in which they appear above and in chapter four.

The first theme is Professional Development, which I defined earlier as “the advancement of skills or expertise to succeed in a particular profession, especially through continued education.”

The participants described their professional development experiences as initiated by various combinations of self, the school, and the school division. SP declared that teachers shared lots of assessment ideas at literacy PD events. JE enjoyed the self-direction and collaboration with like-minded colleagues. RV and DF both felt the school-wide formative assessment PD was valuable.

However participants pointed to some difficulty regarding their various PD experiences. RV and DF cited a lack of support from the school division during the second, and arguably the most important, year of implementation. They indicated that some of the knowledge they gleaned was useful, but with support largely absent the initiative was no longer being fully utilized. SP issued a similar statement indicating that due to various pressures, teachers often fall back on old habits. Pencil and paper tests were specifically cited. JE also felt that when PD was driven by the school board it was not effective. JE even likened these PD experiences to our own classrooms in which we use a didactic pedagogy and have a tendency to bore our students.

Teachers in Saskatoon Public Schools are engaging in professional development. Our schools have invested significant time and resources to have teachers engage in such activities. We even have created collaborative inquiry teams (CITs) that meet several times per school year. These CITs are small groups of up to six teachers who work on a similar research question. There is often a theoretical component, an action research component, and an assessment component.

However, in the light of my findings I see a need to make adjustments in the way teachers are engaging in the CIT process with the College of Education. The first thing we need to realize is that we are not professional researchers. We need to engage in professional reading, and we need to integrate that learning into our practices. However, with the present CIT structure, there

seems to be a rather laborious expectation that there is yet another set of data to collect and analyze and to report on it to school based administrators. This process has a tendency to make it more of an organizational initiative, rather than a collaborative, peer-coaching endeavor. In addition, once it emanates from the board, there is often a lack of buy-in from teachers.

This lack of buy-in can be alleviated in a few simple ways. First we have to acknowledge the support from our employer. Then we have to take back control of the process by seeking to reduce the tedious requirement of more data collection. The process must become more one of peer-coaching and collaborative goal setting. Nothing more. Fellow teachers can come into my classroom, observe me, teach with me and I can reciprocate. Then we can debrief and set goals for the short term and long term. We can identify methods that would improve our individual and collective methodologies.

The College can also continue to promote a positive attitude toward PD by having the teacher candidates participate in their own peer coaching. The linkage between education students and teachers is that teachers could be facilitators for education students. The education students can also accompany their cooperating teacher to the peer-coaching sessions. In this way teachers can be more aware of the education student's learning needs and vice versa. If the process has a positive, self-directed, nurturing approach, then it will more likely have positive impact when novice teachers are hired.

Another suggestion involves school-based administrators. An annual performance review tied into our peer coaching and our assessment practices is needed. By incorporating such a practice, we are explicitly linking what we are learning to our teaching. We then reinforce that formative assessment remains the central focus of our pedagogy.

Some may argue that we conduct performance reviews, but if we do it comprises the principal coming in to watch aspects of a lesson previously agreed upon. How can one not do well with that type of summative evaluation? I would benefit from an assessment with feedback from my peers and administrator focused on my learning goals, on identifying or observing methods, and on refining my practice through co-constructed and meaningful feedback. We can do this together to strengthen my ability to lead and to teach.

The second theme discussed was the culture of marks and grades. Several sub-categories arose within this theme. These categories included students wanting assignments to just be completed; bias in teacher's assessments; parental need to know an achievement percentage; more attractive student work being passed on with the feeling it was better work than previous student work.

Both JG and JE cited that students wanted assignments to be completed, the "funeral of the assignment," as JE put it. When the assignment is done, the teacher is expected to evaluate it and tell the student their mark. RV, DF and JG all stated that the students were not ready to take on ownership of the assessment criteria with any degree of critical mass to make FA an attractive assessment premise to the majority of the students. This leaves teachers holding on to the entire data collection, which seems backward and not sustainable. If we put more of the assessment criteria ownership onto our students, and make the process more meaningful to them, we could also transfer more of the data collection to them. They will strive to demonstrate learning instead of checking the "box" after it has been completed.

If we could now advance this process to where students co-construct the assessment criteria, collect it during conferencing, and parse the data, then they could then complete the assessment loop by making some realistic goals for future learning episodes. With this approach,

students and teachers will be more strongly equipped to speak with parents about the declining importance of an achievement percentage and class average. They will speak more of and show learning outcomes achieved.

In addition, SP cited the use of previous students' work to serve as examples for current students to follow. What SP indicated here was students were using sample pieces to obtain higher marks despite the teacher asking open-ended questions such as, "What can you do to improve?" The students still have desire for an external validation or evaluation of their work. This barrier combined with the parental pressures and JE's assertion that assessment is about little more than the data we can collect, demonstrates why teachers fall back on traditional pencil and paper testing. It is what their "clients" – parents and students – continue to demand.

What can teachers as a group and the College of Education do? Teachers and the College must work in tandem to effect change. The College must work with its undergraduates in much as I suggested teachers work with their students. The key element in that process is to conference with students. During assessment conferences, students will collect their own assessment data. Once collected, the data can be examined individually or in groups. When students have meaningful data and feedback in their possession, they can then make reasonable goals for improvements in future learning episodes.

I have agreed with my participants that data collection is a major problem teachers are facing. We also seem to have conflicting reasons for gathering such information. However, if we let our students take over some of that responsibility, we further empower them while possibly lightening our loads. We might likely have some of the intimidated or apathetic students become more engaged learners.

If the College supports this approach, we will have a much better chance to normalize this behaviour regarding our assessment practice. Teacher candidates will be able to actualize the process for students in the classroom, as they will have had an intimate working knowledge of the process from their own learning experience. Teacher candidates can also aid established teachers in working with this approach. With the school and divisional supports, it is conceivable that we could make full scale FA a reality.

The third theme to be discussed is curriculum and the need to cover the content. We have an obligation to use the curriculum guides to drive the content of our classroom instruction. We also have a great deal of freedom in deciding how we deliver the content to our students. We further have the freedom to assess and evaluate our students' progress. Taken at face value, this situation seems advantageous for teachers. It is. However, there are difficulties that we face with these sets of freedoms and our current focus on reaching a summative evaluation for student progress reports.

JG articulated the difficulties facing teachers are often a result of their perceived own need to get through the curriculum . This need is present despite JG's assertion that the curriculum documents are far too broad and have too much content. If JG is correct, then it also easy to see SP's statement regarding teachers falling back on pencil and paper tests as a natural consequence. My experience is the same. For much of my experience as a grade eight teacher, my math program had a heavy emphasis in June on geometry and data management, accompanied by one or two short summative tests. These tests comprised a page or two in which students defined basic angles, shapes, measured angles and defined mean, median, mode and calculated averages. However, in the past two years I started my school year with geometry and data management so we could use the geometry in other subjects such as visual art and practical

and applied arts. I was also more able to share with students their progress and trends in the sets of summative evaluations so they could rationalize their goals and more fully comprehend the progress reports. We could also keep a larger number of geometry sets intact for much of the school year as students recognized their intended use.

JE described a difficult Yukon project his son was assigned that felt as though the teacher was trying to check off boxes in the term with one multi-faceted complex project. Again it stands to reason the teacher was likely feeling a self-imposed pressure or there were external pressures that drove the assignment to such a scope. JE described how his son felt, plus the pressure this situation put on the parents. I can only imagine what the evaluation process must have been like for the teacher. Was it quickly glancing over each project superficially with a rubric (what may erroneously be interpreted as comprising FA), or was it a more thorough examination of the products followed up with a simple score or well-crafted comments? Either way, the teacher was certainly creating an over-burdensome workload and increasing sense of pressure to cover the curriculum.

It is easy to relate to these pressures if one has ever been a classroom teacher. How did we ever come to this place? We could dissect the reasons for these pressures, but it would be more useful for us to consider the role teachers and the College can have in correcting this deficiency.

In this light I offer possible solutions or suggestions. There are a few items teachers can do consistently that will ease their workload, increase student learning, and make FA a consistent part of their teaching repertoire. Teachers must ensure students have a set of learning objectives posted and available in a variety of media. Posters, class notes, and blogs are easy ways for teachers to make learning objectives readily available. One could even have students take on

these tasks. Some teachers may be already posting learning objectives, but are they doing so using a formative approach? It will be important for the teachers and the students to focus on the learning, rather than on ticking boxes on rubrics. The focus should be on formative assessment, rather than summative.

To correct this error a simple solution is to have students work with the curriculum documents in such a way as to allow them to create their own learning objectives. Unpacking the curriculum documents is not a new idea. However, it is a practice that must be modeled with each new group of students. If we do not unpack the curriculum with each new class and if we recycle the learning objectives from the first time we conducted this exercise, then I believe it is akin to recycling the same set of worksheets one may have used every September at the start of the year, and for every seasonal activity with no deviation. We also miss out on the opportunity to assess the strategies students may use during learning episodes.

Each set of students will create subtle variations in meaning as they examine the curriculum documents. The teacher can get a better sense of the students' desires for their learning and tailor learning episodes to suit each individual. In this way the students can take the learning outcomes, FA, and instruction to assign priority to their learning.

The College must ensure teacher candidates are well versed in dissecting curriculum documents. While all of the participants in my study stated they had little if any training in student assessment, the same is true for unpacking curriculum. By having teacher candidates work in methodology classes that analyze curriculum in this manner, once they graduate, this process will be a normalized part of their practice. Besides acquiring this practical set of skills, the teacher will be better suited to handle the sticky situation that invariably arises when the curriculum is not covered in its entirety. JG stated that ideally, when planning units of study, it is

best to start with the end in mind and know what the learning objectives are. However, in reality, the process doesn't always work this way.

The fourth theme to examine is co-constructed criteria, which is a commonly used term in education these days. One of the benefits mentioned by RV and DF is that the students can take ownership of their learning, achievement, and even behaviour. We have a long way to go, though, in realizing the full potential of this practice.

JG stated that students are used to being force-fed assessment criteria, marks, and assignments. This process reflects the top-down approach we have regarding education. One needs look no further than government initiatives that involve standardized assessments or the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in the United States. If we are to succeed in getting the students to achieve the learning outcomes specified in the curriculum documents, then they need to be involved in deciding the assessment criteria.

Some educators would argue that they are already doing this. DF and RV shared that they are already taking short cuts with the process and sometimes they prescribe the assessment criteria. JG indicated it is impossible to do it all the time with every subject. I suggest that to be able to say one is co-constructing criteria, then one must be engaged in the process by continually unpacking curricula, prioritizing learning outcomes, and defining competence with students. As students grow and develop competence, it seems counter-productive to have a rubric remain static for the better part of a school year even if they were part of its creation. Rubrics and assessment criteria used in this static fashion become summative tools of convenience for teachers and not meeting the true definition of formative assessment.

JE neatly pointed out the need for students and teachers to be more involved with this process of co-constructing criteria. JE's practice involved trying to create a less intimidating

environment for students. There is also a realization of the variety of experiences each student brings into their classroom each day. JE then tried to tie what students do at school with what they do outside of the school. JE experienced success with this approach when it was combined with a low-stakes approach to assessment. There was no value assigned to the video project. There was an acknowledgement of the possibility that technical issues would interfere with the student's digital story telling. JE ensured the students were aware these problems would not result in any penalty. This assumption led JE to conclude this approach succeeded. JE contrasted this project to one that seemed to be much more straightforward. JE wanted to have his students design a house for a practical and applied arts project. With this project the students felt as if they had little to contribute in experience and assessment criteria.

While many teachers may state they use co-constructed criteria with their students, the reality is that they do not. If we really want students to be independent learners, we need to make further changes.

The first change is to realize that the process of co-constructing criteria should be linked to unpacking the curriculum documents with our students. In this way students can better understand the expectations we have for them and they can also make realistic decisions about what learning is important to them.

Second, teachers must accept that the process is time consuming. JG stated there was a sense of doing a poor job of assessment. Since there is no one assessing teachers, this belief may even be ill-informed. RV and DF admitted to taking short cuts . Almost all participants stated they felt it was impossible to co-construct criteria for every subject they taught. It would seem that if we are to move our students from a mindset of being force-fed into one of ownership of the assessment criteria, then we need to be prepared to spend a much higher proportion of our

instructional time dealing with this skill development. We can also learn from the account of JE's video project in creating an atmosphere decidedly low-stakes in terms of evaluation. We need to create an environment in which it is acceptable to experience failure. JE removed the technical issues as part of the assessment, not that they went away. I believe JE's students learned about the technical aspects of video production without having the burden of evaluation placed upon them. I also think that we should consider making mistakes to be a part of the assessment problem, because we learn from them. However, if we rely too heavily on content delivery, it becomes impossible to allow students to demonstrate learning in any other capacity. If a student produces a project filled with technical errors, but they know the learning outcomes and can discuss their shortcomings, the result is just as authentic. This result also provides an extension of student learning by empowering students to take on the collection of their own assessment data and the analysis. It is somewhat like asking them to write their own performance review, which is common in today's business world.

The College must become more active in training teacher candidates to co-construct their own assessment criteria. There is probably more work involved in this process in the university realm because it must be formally grounded in theory. The College must make sure teacher candidates are connecting their school-based experiences in the assessment world. All participants interviewed reported little, if any assessment training. Can we also assume they have not had a thorough understanding of unpacking the curriculum?

The fifth theme covered is class size and time. As the number of students increases in a classroom, the teacher's workload increases. In addition, the number of student resources such as textbooks, computers, and work space decreases. When we combine large class sizes with ill-informed expectations of parents, with the expectation for covering large volumes of curriculum

material, teachers are forced to fall back on marks driven assessments. JG and SP stated pencil and paper tests are the preferred method to report student progress when faced with increased class size and time pressures. This problem places teachers in a difficult and vulnerable situation.

JG also shared that professional development time was used to ensure there was enough time available to conduct reading conferences with each student. It is interesting to see that teachers are sacrificing their own learning time so they can properly conduct formative assessments of their students' reading. JG felt that conferences were the best way to learn about the students and their reading abilities and preferences. This situation begs the question, when does the professional learning take place?

DF and RV shared that to follow FA processes to the letter (unpacking curricula, co-constructing criteria, conducting assessments, and performing the data collection) is just not possible. They further stated the students will often shortcut the process. While this situation may seem to be a complaint, I view it as an opportunity. I prefer to see this case as the students shortening the process because they are internalizing the process. This opportunity is ideal for teachers to make FA part of the classroom routine. It is also a great opportunity for teachers to reduce their workload by decreasing pencil and paper marking.

Teachers have a simple role to play for class size and instructional time. We have to let go of the elements out of our control. What we need is to ensure that we have taken control of the things for which we are directly responsible. If we have built a thorough culture of student assessment this goal should be easy to achieve. We need to learn from JG that our professional development time should be such and that student assessments should be included in instructional time.

Teachers can also learn by following the examples of JG, RV, DF, SP, and JE when they take the time to conference with students. We need to empower ourselves to place less emphasis on the artifact collection, spreadsheet analysis, and other forms of evidence we collect. The findings suggest that for many teachers these items are little more than relics of the past practice to justify our position relative to the volume of work completed as it relates to the curriculum guides.

The College has a simple role . When working with the teacher candidates, they need to ensure that conferencing with instructors is a normal part of the course routine. During my pre-service training, I can recall only one instance during which I had a scheduled conference with an instructor. It was not a good experience. During these conferences, other practical pieces must be explored. Items such as monthly schedules of a school, and seasonal and term schedules must be considered. It may seem to be simplistic, but I believe teaching to be a practical endeavor; and at the undergraduate level, we need to better integrate the theoretical and the practical.

The final theme I explore is student motivation. I wonder to what extent we really consider student motivation? Rarely do we hear students discussing the curriculum. Do we ever really hear students en masse stating their enthusiasm for the learning outcomes? Why not?

JG described students wanting to see the mark at the end of an assignment, and stated that students were not motivated to respond to feedback. For instance, if students saw themselves at a level two on a rubric, they felt it was acceptable to recognize they were a “two” and remain there.

RV and DF stated that in their experience, students were only inclined to demonstrate motivation if they were already predisposed to self-improvement. A structure was present in FA that a few students liked, or understood, but usually, students needed assistance to buy in to the

process and then navigate their way through it. Teachers took short cuts to facilitate student motivation, which may have reduced the effectiveness of the FA. Again, this becomes a circular pattern of failure.

JE pointed out that in his experience many students feel intimidated by school and especially when being made to conference with teachers. JE felt that the kids were afraid to find out what areas they needed to improve and they wished to avoid disastrous experiences. I completely understand that feeling. I disliked it as a boy and I hate it as an adult when I'm given feedback. I do not want to have others think I am performing at any level other than excellent. It seems if we work to make this process a normal part of our daily interactions with students, and administrators make it a normal part of the routine with teachers, then we could alleviate the negativity associated with conferencing. Conferencing should be an investigation of knowledge, skill, and competence, not solely a rehashing of perceived failure. The latter is detrimental and ineffective.

RV and DF alluded to the idea that students in grade five and younger have a predisposition toward using the feedback and then making goal-oriented statements so they can improve their learning. They also stated that students have a tendency to ignore the feedback once we applied a summative value to their work. JE described a similar phenomenon with middle years and high school teachers.

JE intimated that the high schools build the need for marks and there is a price attached to the marks. Scholarships and university entrance can be determined on the basis of marks. JE stated there is a marks race often reinforced by grade eight teachers. Some educators maintain these marks have a direct impact upon a grade nine student's placement in high school. In reality the marks received in grade eight only influence a conversation regarding placement for grade

nine. I have found that the final placement for a grade nine student is a decision made by the parents.

It seems unethical perpetuating these myths and allowing teachers to create this concern under the guise of motivating students to do better at school. JE described our current practices as doing little more than motivate kids to action, not to facilitate their learning. They are completing as much of their own Yukon projects under false pretenses, and the learning outcome may be of little value.

What is the role of the teacher ? Our reality is that we lack a clear and common language of assessment, and therefore are wanting for a common assessment philosophy. These two inconsistencies then lead us to have poor assessment practices. Teachers need to empower themselves to focus less on the marks and avoid the resulting marks race. We also need to make sure that when relying on assessments to inform conversations regarding such things as high school placement and scholarships, an interview component is included. It is time consuming, but as the participants in this study have stated, it is a valuable process. Educators readily accept the benefit of regular students' conferences. Therefore, a similar advantage will occur if conferences are held regarding student scholarships and high school placement. We can then put more onus of placement on the student, and not have credit or blame of the consequences solely applied to the parents or the teacher.

The College again must normalize this process. We need novice teachers to enter service comfortable about questioning why we still rely on CAT/4 tests; or why we still allow parents to have the final say in program placement; or why teachers can perpetuate an inappropriate marks race in elementary school, and so forth. By preparing our new teachers to address these issues,

we will be in a better position to have young teachers enter the profession with solid assessment practices as our older teachers retire.

In conclusion, I see three principles that must be applied to establish FA in more effective manner. By effective, I mean that FA is the primary driver of decision making regarding education.

The first principle is to have the structure in place. This objective is a function of the curriculum guides as the framework for instruction. Reviewing the current curriculum documents provides little concrete information and direction regarding assessment. Much is left up to the teacher to decide using his/her “professional” judgment. The curriculum guide for grade eight mathematics states (Saskatchewan Education, 2014):

Ongoing feedback and reflection, both for students and teachers, are crucial in classrooms when learning for deep understanding. Deep understanding requires that both the teacher and students need to be aware of their own thinking as well as the thinking of others. Feedback from peers and the teacher helps students rethink and solidify their understandings. Feedback from students to the teacher gives much needed information in the teacher's planning for further and future learning.

The curriculum documents also include passages regarding deeper thinking and inquiry learning. These components are two very important aspects of teaching. However, one sees from the study that formative assessment gets pushed aside in favour of a summative evaluation in response to administrative data collection needs; parental desire for a marks based, competitive learning environment; and the teacher’s own need to completely cover the curriculum.

It would seem that the authors of the curriculum documents are encouraging teachers to have their assessment practices shift in favour of a more formative approach. As shown by the participants' comments throughout this research, one sees that the transformation of the curriculum body of work does not transcend into outcome at the practical level. It is evidenced that the College is not widely incorporating the FA model into their theoretical or applied programming. The structure of assessment in the classroom is not aligned and teachers by the profession cannot consistently demonstrate and apply the concept to their practice and profession. It appears that encouragement is not enough.

What is perplexing is that we have the principles of FA and inquiry outlined in the curriculum guides and we feel as teachers it is an important process, yet we seem hesitant to properly apply FA in our classrooms. How can the constraints be reduced?

One of the biggest barriers to an effective implementation of FA is the lack of a common definition for FA. Earlier in this chapter I suggested the following as a definition of FA: Formative assessment is the demonstration by students they can act upon descriptive feedback to show they have achieved a learning outcome regardless of mode (oral, written, performance, etc.). I argue that it is less important to focus on what is achieved, but more important to emphasize how they are achieving.

Once we have agreement on the semantics of the definition, we can better determine how to actualize FA within our assessment continuum. It will not be an elective. It will be a requirement of the profession and enshrined in our pedagogical practices and behaviours. It will become the foundation of our teaching model and philosophy. We could argue that the curriculum guides provide a common language that can be applied province-wide or even as part of the Western-Northern protocol.

I further suggest that the notion of student motivation may change for the better if teachers normalized their behavior regarding student assessment. It would seem apropos to acknowledge our failing as a profession to actualize the FA model for ourselves. By identifying our own deficiencies we create an understanding and acceptance with our students that together we will unpack, co-construct, and redefine our learning, evidence, and outcomes; and that together we will rebuild our assessment model. If teachers discussed openly differences regarding curricula and priorities for teaching and learning and for assessment, then is it possible students will do the same? Can we envision a future state of student assessment defined collectively?

The final principle for adopting FA as a normalized part of our routine is to have the resources to support change. I believe we have the collective knowledge to implement province wide FA. Where we are deficient is with our collective will to make the changes necessary. Ours is a highly charged political endeavor. We are challenged to make our schools attractive to prospective families and their children and to returning students. If we fail to place students in our schools, we will lose the funding required to operate our facilities.

We need teaching professionals uniquely capable to act as FA mentors, teachers, and as advocates. With this set of skills we will maintain an attractiveness within our schools to ensure we are not reduced to competing for “bums in seats.” But, rather we will collaborate with all of the participants to create rich learning environments.

I have wondered why we have seemed hesitant to get on with FA. I believe that we have done a disservice to the profession in allowing people to spend their entire lives in kindergarten to grade twelve schools, enter university and graduate with a bachelor’s degree in education, and then get right back into school to perpetuate the cycle. This cohort is a narrow, insulated

experience-set that has little bearing on the real world. I took a unique path into teaching. As a salesman, I moved from the boardroom to the sales floor, dealing with profit and loss, customer service, warranty issues, managing sales territories, and even failure. All were connected to various degrees of conflict.

When we have people in schools lacking such experiences, and who possess the conflict resolution skill of using educational jargon it is easy to see we need to require some additional skills for our teacher candidates. To accumulate meaningful experience and knowledge, one must have a diverse and varied background. Our teacher candidates must be assessed on what they have done and learned from their prior experience and not just their grade point average from high school. Even though some educators possess this quality, there needs to be more of them.

I believe that, so far, the true potential of formative assessment and student involved assessment have been ignored. Perhaps, with a closer relationship between the College of Education and teachers, teachers and parents can learn of the potential for this teaching method. If this were to happen, we could be on the cusp of an educational revolution.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Transcripts

First Interview Transcription – JG (June 7, 2008)

JM: What formal training do you have with student assessment?

JG: I think that in university we didn't focus a whole lot on assessment, and I never took any specific assessment courses that I can remember. We talked about it some of the curriculum classes, but I don't remember any formal assessment classes. Our school has been focusing on AFL for our last school plan (strategic plan) over the last two years and continuing into next year. We focused mainly on writing for the past two years and next year we are moving on into math which I think will be interesting because I guess I don't do as much of the formative assessment in math and next year we are focusing more on that as a school. I have taken it upon myself to go to as many conferences as I can on assessment. I went to Rick Stiggins' conference, the big one last year.

JM: How was Stiggins?

JG: Stiggins was good. There were a lot of good break-out sessions there.

JM: Did he push student-involved assessment?

JG: Yes, and also trying to identify and catch those kids who are not making it for whatever reason. His big thing was that kids who get it will continue to get it and the kids that aren't (getting it) need the most help, which makes sense but we don't often do that (provide the most assistance to those kids). I find that we are spending our time with the kids who are getting it and maybe that makes us feel good because this kid gets it and that perhaps makes you feel good as a teacher that they are getting it, whereas the kid who isn't getting it (understanding a concept) sometimes it is a bit more frustrating working with them.

JM: Yeah, sometimes it can be hard to identify not who is at fault, but identifying how to help that kid get it, how to identify where the learning gap is and how to move them from where they are currently situated to a higher level.

JG: It is a matter of getting those bottom kids caught up. You know it is a matter realizing that the advanced kids will still be advanced as you move on. But the lower level students need most of your time.

JM: Yeah. You are teaching grade eight?

JG: Yes.

JM: How do you find the kids generally when you do use FA strategies? Are they receptive to it or do they want to see a summative evaluation such as a numerical grade or letter grade or a percentage?

JG: The culture in schools has been for years that students want to see their mark. “What is my mark?” That has been the practice for so long that students are still getting used to the idea of having some input into how they will be marked. They are used to teachers handing back their paper with a percentage mark on it, the students look at it and they throw it in their folder or the garbage and then move onto the next one.

JM: Do you find that as you use FA strategies that it forces you to be more creative and renew and to some extent reinvent not necessarily the way you do things, but the products you want students to create?

JG: I think it makes you think of the end before you teach your unit or lesson. You have to have the end in mind and I think that is very important for teachers and students. And again I can’t say that I do it for everything, because it is time consuming and at the end of the day, curriculum being what it is (the need to cover content) you need to get going.

JM: Do you find that you are pressured to cover a certain amount of content?

JG: I think that there is too much content. If you are looking at individual objectives, math for example, I think can be broken down into some bigger ideas and we can focus more on getting these kids to learn some big ideas rather than trying to get through those individual objectives in the curriculum guide which is really an impossible task.

JM: Right.

JG: If you take it objective by objective. It is not going to happen for every kid. We need to break it down and rework it.

JM: Do you find the curriculum guides are cumbersome or clumsy to work with?

JG: To be honest, I don’t find that they are helpful at all with the exception of social studies which I find to be very helpful. You can almost teach straight from that thing without adding to it. I think that some of the other guides have some good things in them, but those documents could definitely be improved. It seems that as teachers we are trying to teach the same objectives and yet we are trying to find hundreds of different ways to do the same thing. If people were more closely aligned, for example with our literacy for life initiative, we are sharing lots of ideas and that, to me, just makes sense to share ideas and meet objectives in similar ways instead of each individual trying to struggle through to meet these learning objectives, we can be more unified in our approach to delivering curriculum. That would be beneficial to both teachers and students.

JM: That is interesting because we had talked at length during one of my grad classes about collaborating and reworking some professional development models to address the idea of how we interpret curriculum documents and truly deciding for a school what is important and what we can omit (from the curriculum guides) during the course of teaching and then looking how we deliver those objectives and how we assess them.

JG: I know one of the areas of focus in math is going to be either working in, we have a small staff so it is going to be difficult, as we cannot work with grade alike or even grade similar colleagues as we are all split, but we are going to try breaking that curriculum down into some big ideas. I have found that we spend too much effort trying to get through all of the content and not doing enough justice to the big ideas. As a result we lose too many kids in math and we all end up becoming frustrated as a result of trying to get through too much content and not doing anything really well.

JM: I have often thought about that at the end of the day and wondered “what was I even bothering to that for?”

JG: Or, who actually got that concept? Or, what was the point of that concept?

JM: Another participant commented with respect to curriculum objectives and paring them down and he asked me when the hell were you ever to likely divide fractions again? He reasoned that if you worked at NASA there would be software to do that for you and in a bakery if you need to reduce a recipe, you will know what half of a half of one cup is.

JG: Yes. I don’t think that this idea has been looked at for a long time as we are still doing some of these things, and we are trying to make things relevant to kids and demonstrate how these ideas may be used in the future. With a lot of the objectives, I cannot even give them an answer for that. I don’t use it. Maybe in certain jobs you could but I find that we need to find out what they need to learn, and get them to become good at those things.

JM: Do you think that is something that most people would be receptive to? That idea of giving kids more freedom and opportunity to pick and choose what they want to do and learn?

JG: The tough thing I am finding is that even with FA and building rubrics with kids and having them take ownership over criteria is that they are used to being force-fed. They are used to us telling them what to do, what the resulting mark is, and what the next assignment is going to be. Now I find that more teachers at my school are doing this but it takes time. You can’t build a rubric for everything you are going to teach. What I have tried to do is to pick certain projects and different styles of writing and we focus on building rubrics and creating assessment criteria with the students. As I progress through my career, each year I plan to focus on something new. Next year I will focus on math. I am pretty comfortable with co-constructing assessments for writing and science. I think that it is important that you take it slowly and do these new things at your own pace. I think that a lot of teachers feel that it is way more work [than traditional grading]. They think that it is too much work because they need to do it for everything. I think that you need to start slowly and work with what you are comfortable with and move on from there. Kids are the same. They are not comfortable yet with the building of rubrics and the establishment of criteria. You need to also lead them along slowly so they can get used to it. We have a culture of marks and percentages and that is what they are used to. So it is not only getting the teachers used to it, it is also a matter of getting the students used to a new way of assessment.

JM: Right. It is pretty interesting, I think that it is fair to say that most of us feel that we are in a top-down environment. Teachers mandate comes from administration, and administration's mandate comes from the board, and so on. It seems to be counter-intuitive to tell kids that they need to decide for themselves what is important to learn and how you want to learn it and then demonstrate what you have learned. It is a pretty freaky thing for a lot of people.

JG: The other this is of course selling that to parents. We can put all of our fancy curriculum comments on their [students'] report cards and some will really read them and focus on those, but at the end of the day, I think that better than half to three quarters of the parents are only looking at the mark and class average. And they are questioning why their kids are below average or above average. It is those parents who will take the most convincing [that formative assessments] are the way to go. They are also products of the percentage grade and the mark and the average because that is what they went through in school and that is what they expect to see on their kid's report cards.

JM: So if people are so focused on averages, and the numerical scoring aspects of assessment, how do we decide what is really a valid indicator of learning and what a reliable measure is? For example, I have found myself looking at cumulative folders and comparing my marks for a kids with a previous teacher's marks and have felt relief that my evaluation is consistent with their marks, that I am in the ballpark. So then how do we determine what is reliable and what is a valid way to measure the students' learning without continuing to pigeon-hole a student as being, for example, a "mid-seventies student"?

JG: The more I learn about assessment I can't help but feel that I have been doing a poor job of it. This is not to say that I am doing a bad job, but I don't think that anything is truly free of bias. I think that if we look at a learning objective and ask if they know it or not. It doesn't need to be marked as a seventy-eight, we need to know if they can do it or not. I don't agree with even having percentages. I know it is necessary to have them perhaps in senior high school because in university they get percentages. But I would say that up to grade eight the point of having percentages is really useless in my opinion. This is a result of the learning I have done with respect to assessment. I am speaking as an individual who is a product of percentages and I have always liked to see my mark. I think that having a kid sit down with you and having them talk you through a math problem. This year I am conducting reading conferences with my kids, and asking questions like "how did you make that connection?" They tell me about the connections and then I know that they are able to meet certain learning objectives. It is hard to put a percentage on a kid's reading ability unless you sit and listen to them read and ask them "How did you make that visualization? What was in your head? What was going through your mind while you were reading that book?" Then I can say that they know how to do this. But how can I put a percentage on that? Is it 100%, or did they only tell me 80% of their visualization? I just don't understand how percentages become relevant when we are doing some of these assessments.

JM: It is like saying I value one kid's thought processes higher than I value this other kids thought processes. That really does seem to be unfair. How much time would you spend doing those conferences? How many kids do you have this year?

JG: I have twenty-nine kids. That is another issue – class size. To do any really valuable formative assessment I think that to have twenty-nine kids in your class does the process a disservice as well. At the end of the day you may want to have done more formative assessment, but you sometimes just have to get those marks. They have to be on the report cards and they have to go home to the parents. Here is your test, and here is your mark. I find that happens especially in mathematics when you are slugging through a whole bunch of stuff. You really just need to get that mark and to be able to back up that mark with some tests. But, for me to sit and conference with twenty-nine kids about math when I am trying to also conference about reading...you cannot do it for all subject areas. That is, unless, of course, you happen to have a bunch of extra time, and we do not.

JM: Yeah. And at the grade eight level you have just about everything going on. So are you teaching everything with the exception of French and band?

JG: That's right.

JM: So if you look at it, I think that is about ten or eleven different subject areas you are responsible for?

JG: Yes. So what I have been doing is to pick and choose when you can co-construct rubrics and set assessment criteria. I really make a conscious effort to do that as much as possible. There are excuses for everything and you would like to do it more often but the reality is at the end of the day you simply do not have the time. So what I am trying to do this year with the Literacy for Life initiative was to use the couple of half days for professional development was to research our inquiry question. So I took that time and I did my reading conferences with kids. I tried to do one each reporting period and to be honest you can learn more about a kid's reading in a ten minute conference than I did in a whole year. It is just amazing that we do not do more of this and we are not given the opportunity to more of this type of thing because it just so valuable.

JM: Is this something with which we just need to change our mindset and say the focus is not on the delivery of content but my focus will be on helping these kids learn what is important? Teaching them how they learn and how they can apply that learning to future learning episodes? Make them become more autonomous?

JG: That would be more helpful. To talk to kids about the learning process would be the ideal way to have it. But it is just not happening.

(Break in the interview to resolve technical difficulties)

JM: This is a continuation of my interview with a confidential informant. We were discussing the idea of spending as much time as possible co-creating rubrics, but that you also need to get on with the delivery of content as well. You mentioned that (the learning) process was important but, again finding the time when you have twenty-nine kids to sit down and interview each one for ten minutes, that is 290 minutes just for that one activity alone. In some subject areas that is your weekly allotment of minutes. For example, I believe that math is 300 minutes per week.

JG: You must try to find the time because they (student conferences) are a valuable activity. If we weren't so focused on percentages and getting that mark on their report card, you can find the time to do it. Maybe not for everything, but pick one or two subjects per term and spend five minutes with a kid and you (the teacher) will learn a lot more than if you took in a test or an assignment (for assessment).

JM: Do you think we would benefit in our approach to assessment if we went entirely away from a quantitative approach? At least at the middle level and the elementary school level and really focused on a qualitative approach, the quality of their learning, the quality of their products, and the way they demonstrate their learning? Rather than spending all of this time trying to quantify it?

JG: I think that we have to realize, everyone is not going to go university and be a doctor...(interview is briefly interrupted)

JM: Do you find that student motivation is improved when you use formative assessment techniques and get the students involved in the assessment strategies?

JG: I think that it is so new to the students that they are still trying to figure it out. But they do like seeing what they need to achieve before they start learning about it. It is important to realize that many of us used to begin units without having any idea of what the end of the unit should be like. I often had no idea, let alone the students. At a conference I attended, it was stated that if they can see the target, then the students will be more likely to hit it, or some quote to that effect. That seems to make sense, but there are some kids who, and you can give them all of the assessment criteria you want to, are still going to give you the same crap (poor quality products or performance). Maybe the motivation to be in school for them is not there regardless of what we do. I think that for the students who are already engaged, they definitely appreciate seeing that target, and then they know what they need to do.

JM: Do you think that over time as you get better at those assessment strategies and techniques that those kids who aren't typically turned on by school will, when they realize that they have some power to decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn it may become a little more engaged?

JG: I think that, and I have seen some improvement throughout the year in some cases, the funny thing is that when you have those students do a self-assessment, and they hand in their work, they may self-assess at a level two on a five point rubric, my question to them is why are you handing in something that is a two? If you think that it is a two, what do you think I am going to think it is? Again, some kids will realize that there is more work to be done, and some will still state, "This is what I did." That is frustrating especially when they know what was expected of them. It is frustrating also that they assess themselves at a low level, and produce a low level of work. I am beginning to see more students meeting the criteria, and justify that they deserve full marks. This does get back to the marks, but it is a positive step.

JM: Those kids who are self-assessing at a two, don't you feel that there is some utility in having them recognize that they are being honest with themselves and with you?

JG: Yes, because I know that they are at least conscious of knowing what they need to do, and how to improve their learning. It is a matter of getting them to take that next step. But it is good that they recognize that. I also feel that part of that (low level self-assessment) is that they are used to seeing that two. They see themselves as a two. That is part of this culture of marks. They feel that they are a 50% student, or whatever the case may be. Then they get stuck in that rut of thinking that this is what I am. I guess what I do see more of when you give them a target, is that do see what they are shooting for and they take a little more time to try to meet that target.

JM: You mentioned parents earlier. Are you running into any significant resistance from parents when you use these formative assessment strategies? You mentioned that they want to see the mark and the class average and don't seem to be particularly interested in the curriculum objective based comments on report cards and other reporting documents.

JG: In my experience, parents do not seem to be interested in how kids are assessed, they are concerned with the percentage at the end of the term. Next year we are going to be more conscious of informing parents about the new math program that is coming. There has been a lot of resistance to the Nelson math program at our school. This is because the idea is to concentrate more on process and they (the parents) are products of the pencil and paper school of math. They want to see the algorithms, and kids memorizing their multiplication tables, here is the assignment, go do it. Now, there is some value to some of that stuff, but there is lots of resistance to the process based and language based approach to mathematics. I actually wanted to try a "markless" math class. I be might a year or two away from that, but it is a goal to go "markless" in a subject area, and to see what the parent reaction would be. There needs to a lot of communication with that.

JM: There is a guy in high school who does a grade nine math class that is "markless". He says that it has worked very well for those kids who struggle.

JG: You show that kid that they have failed a test, and they continue to struggle. If you go "markless", then to them all they need to do is master that concept. They can take the time they need to do it. The pressure for me, as a teacher, is to deliver the curriculum in its entirety and not what we deem to be important. So, I still feel that I am being pulled both ways on that issue. You are legally responsible for delivering the curriculum, and you know that that is doing a disservice to about one-third of your class. The challenge is going to be in finding out how to condense the curriculum into big ideas, and to focus on those because that is how change will occur when we spend some time looking at this. Otherwise it will be same old, same old.

JM: When you say big ideas, what do you mean?

JG: If you have a decimals, fractions and percent unit, they will be lumped together in the curriculum within numbers and operations. Let's say that within those three concepts there

are twenty-five learning objectives, I think that you need to simply teach the relationship between these numbers. We should be trying to develop number sense with these kids and if you are pounding out twenty-five objectives then they get a poor indication of how they are doing. I think that we should have them do a few things really well. That is more beneficial to them – to have number sense. We are teaching them to be able to do certain types of problems, but they are not able to apply those techniques to different situations because they have no number sense. Trying to teach too many things lends itself to going through a textbook page by page, teaching concepts and giving a test then repeating the process over and over. I think that teachers feel lots of pressure to get through as much of that thing as they can in a year. Teachers are responsible. They will do their job. You have to believe that. You hire people to teach and you have to have a trust in them that they will deliver curriculum. That is a basic aspect of our job. It is tough to provide freedom and that is the fear. But we do have freedom in the manner in which we deliver the curriculum, it is just a matter of scaling it back and becoming responsible for doing it a different way.

JM: I have never ever gone through any of the curriculum guides from start to finish and completed an entire grade eight year. Do you think that it fair to say that we know that there is not a single grade eight teacher who will? Then based on that knowledge, feel comfortable paring things down to a reasonable level?

JG: It is already happening to some extent, but what you try to do at the end of the year when you pound through geometry and data management, whatever you have left until the end, you are still trying to cover a little bit of everything so they have seen enough of the curriculum. But we all know that you don't cover everything. So in that regard, the paring down is already happening. But you still feel that responsibility to touch on all of the curriculum objectives. But with the Nelson math program, there are some teachers, with no fault to the teacher, the kids do not understand the language of these books, they are only getting through four or five units out of thirteen in an entire year. This is happening consistently across the board. It is not an isolated situation. I would say that at most, teachers are covering only six or seven units per year. That is slightly better than half of the program. What good is that doing?

JM: Are they only getting through six units of the Nelson program, but covering other units from the curriculum documents using supplemental resources?

JG: I'm not sure. They have started this program in the younger grades, but we are experiencing a lot of frustration and I think I'll be experiencing some frustration next year when I make the switch over to the Nelson math program. I believe that teachers are using supplementary materials, but they are still not covering enough of the curriculum.

JM: I have heard the comment that Nelson math is tough, but that in the long run, kids will know more about math than they will if they used our older programs.

JG: It is a new way of doing things, so we need to take the time, and it is important to realize that nothing good happens without some struggle. We are going to have to go through that struggle, but I think that it is going to be beneficial.

JM: In a nutshell, in your opinion, formative assessment and student involved assessment strategies, are these something you are going to continue with over the long haul? Is that the way that assessments need to go?

JG: I think that FA is beneficial and I will continue to add to my assessment repertoire each year. It is important that as teachers we do not remain stagnant. The way that school division and the province are viewing assessment and student involvement is great. I am sticking with it. There are obvious challenges but, you need to do what you are comfortable doing but add to it each year. You cannot jump in completely in your first year. That is why people find new things so overwhelming. That is why there is a lot of resistance to the changes that are occurring. If you take a bit at a time, and build upon that, you see the value in FA, involving the students in their assessments, and having the end in sight. There are still times when you need to give the students a summative evaluation. Challenges like class size, and time will dictate that you cannot do everything using FA. It is impossible with our present structure.

JM: What are the biggest challenges to FA and student involved assessments?

JG: Time is number one. That is directly tied to class size in my opinion. Second would be changing the culture of summative evaluation that we are a product of. And more importantly, the parents of our students are a product of summative evaluation.

JM: We are still using a 19th century model of education.

JG: That is also why change in this area is so difficult. We are a century or more into this summative style of assessment. Even the notion of students having some ownership over how they are going to be marked, let alone self-assessment and some of these other things are just foreign to parents. It was to me up until two or three years ago when I started looking into this (assessment) stuff. Other challenges are ideas like general student motivation. I find that students are not as motivated, and this is of course a generalization, there are still many good students, but I think that they are less motivated than even five years ago when I started teaching. Maybe this can become a way of re-motivating students. Students seem to want to have more control and to do things for themselves. Kids seem to be growing up faster and are more independent in a way. They are frequently left on their own – especially kids in grade eight.

JM: I see that for sure.

JG: You know, giving them a bit more responsibility over their own assessment will be a really good thing.

End of interview.

Second Interview Transcription – RV and DF (June 16, 2008)

JM: This is meant to be a brief conversation about formative assessment, and your thoughts and perceptions about FA and how well it works for you, what types of training you have had, and that kind of thing. One of the prompts we came up with in an earlier conversation was that you felt AFL did not match up with the reporting criteria that we are meant to use on the reports cards.

RV: It doesn't. That is partly because when you do formative assessments, and you are truly involving the students in what you are doing, then your evaluation changes constantly. Although the report card has room for the comments, so that you can create your own evaluation on the report card because it is still tied into a percentage, we run into problems.

DF: For example, marking a class average and a student's individual average doesn't work for me when you are doing AFL. It doesn't fit at all.

JM: Are we necessarily tied to a percentage? Can we not opt out and do something different?

RV: No we can't. Not at this point in time.

DF: I think that they are going to move to that in time, if the system (SPSD #13) truly believes in AFL.

RV: The trouble is that the parents really want that percentage there. It was how they were raised, it is what they relate to. That way they know immediately when they look at that 72% average for their child, and see a class average of 68%, they can then say, "Johnny is doing alright." I feel fine. I have nothing to worry about.

DF: In saying that we can still use AFL and assign marks and averages. And that is what we are trying to do. For most of our assignments, a major writing assignment for example, if you use a rubric and student examples, and you move through a process, then everyone should be able to get a really good mark if they want to. What I find as the really frustrating part is the good kids who move through that process and want to do well will be fine. What I find to be difficult is that kids do not care. They want you to just give them a mark and not have to repeat an assignment four times. Sometimes that gets lost because parents have not gone through that system and the kids are new to it. If we start it and build upon the process and then parents might accept the fact that you may only do one or two projects a term.

RV: That is what causes me some problems. The fact that if you work with a good group and they are truly motivated you will end up with everybody doing extremely well. That is fine from an educational standpoint, I have ended up with class averages of 94%.

DF: Yes, exactly.

RV: Even though I have no problem with that because mastery is great, and it is wonderful that they have gotten it (concept attainment), it doesn't necessarily work if you are putting it on a report card or if you are pleasing someone else.

JM: Who would gripe about a 94% class average?

RV: If that was to occur in language arts that would also mean that for every child who received a mark like that, the parents are going to be expecting that there are going to be "E's" (performance indicators noting students are "excelling" at certain behaviours) on the report card. And you can't do that. There can't be that many "exceeding expectations" on a report card.

JM: So it is like that old grading on the bell curve kind of thing.

RV: Exactly.

DF: Our report cards simply do not match with this AFL philosophy. Plus the AFL is mostly narrative feedback. And narrative feedback in that we identify the stage that a student has attained, and they do not want to provide an average mark in AFL. What we are meant to identify is the next step for a student and how they can achieve the next objective. I think that is the frustrating part.

RV: So what you are saying is that we can use this as a teaching tool but we can't use it for evaluation.

DF: That is what it seems like to me.

RV: Yes.

DF: The kids are good at picking out where they fit on those rubrics. They know within reason where they are. The kids that want to go ahead can because they know what the next logical steps are to move to the next level. Most kids are quite happy to be done "what's next." That is a mindset for moving through as well.

RV: There is no denying that when it is that clear cut, they love it. They know exactly what is expected of them. There is nothing subjective about this. There is no chance that they won't do well if they follow the steps. Considering that in most cases they have helped create those steps, they have ownership they normally wouldn't have. But you can't necessarily use it for evaluation.

JM: So it falls short on the reporting end of things.

RV: Yes, but it still a great tool for teaching and for practicing concepts.

JM: What about time? That was one of the other issues that came up. The time that is required to teach kids how to establish assessment criteria, and the time to practice it.

RV: If you follow the process to the letter and you go through all of the brainstorming first, then you introduce your models, both good and poor, and you dissect those to establish what makes a good piece of writing, for example, you then also categorize those criteria – you are looking at hours. It is just not possible. But of course, what ends up happening is that the kids end up short cutting that process themselves. If this is the fifth time that you are creating a rubric for a writing assignment, they get pretty good at remembering that they need to include mechanics, for example. They will know that this includes capitalization, punctuation, spelling and grammar.

DF: And general categories. The kids (DF's students) have a general rubric they all use for reader's response journals and personal journals. Unless I go back and review those rubrics every time I don't find that the kids are using them as much as they should.

RV: Do they have to create them every time?

DF: Not every time. We will do one at the beginning of the year for each. Then I hope that each time we did a reader's response that the kids would all refer back to the appropriate rubric. We will periodically revisit the rubrics to make appropriate changes. So for some of the standard types of assignments we are using, I let the kids evaluate themselves. If it is something special like a research poster, then we will do that separately. But you are right, it takes a ton of time. And I don't get into the categorization. I often do that for them.

RV: That is often where I will take short cuts.

DF: By grade seven they already know – we need to include mechanics, content and appearance. So you can shortcut some of those aspects. I think that a lot of teachers have been doing this forever, anyway. Maybe not the complete AFL but a lot of teachers have used this marking scale for kids. We have the freedom to omit parts as well. For example, I may omit mechanics. But we may focus on content. Then you have to expand upon that. It can be very helpful in that regard. Again, it is really hard, and I find the pressure more so with grades six, seven and eight. When I was teaching grade five, I did not have that pressure to come up with marks (marks do not appear on report cards until grade six). If you put a kid on a rubric and they got four, or a one, and I have always put four at the top (highest level), then to try and translate those into marks and to put them on a report card and then to have to justify those marks is really tough. We will still then have the parents wanting to know what the class average is. Where does my kid fit? What did he not hand in? What did he not do? Whereas, in grade five if you gave a kid a four on an assignment using a rubric, they were excited because that was the top. Or they would say "I got two fours and next time I will do this...(to improve)" They did not care about averages, and performance indicators like that.

RV: Then you have to start thinking about the high school system and I wonder if we are going to be doing FA and AFL, and if we are going to see a change in which marks and averages are less important, then is that going to have an impact on the high school system where marks are still important.

DF: During my kids high school careers, through three kids in high school English, I had one semester with one teacher, who taught my oldest son, where she would let them redo a paper until they were satisfied. Then she would give them a final mark.

RV: Wow.

DF: I remember he did a paper six times because he was ticked off. Now with computers, that is easier, because kids can be shown what to change, and it easy to correct. Now, she did the editing and helped him. She did not have a rubric for them to follow. She would go through the piece, and he would rewrite it. I could not believe that, I thought that was pretty amazing. Because he was motivated to get a better mark, he worked through that process with her. I thought that was pretty amazing for a high school teacher. But she was the only one out of twelve person years at high school.

RV: Now are you using AFL in math as well?

DF: Not much in math. No.

RV: I have to admit that I had great ideas to do it at the start of the year, but it has not happened.

DF: That is partly because I am using that new “Math Focus” which has it built in. And I am struggling a lot with that program because I am not strong enough at teaching that particular program.

JM: Is that resource published by Nelson?

DF: Yes. They do lay out some of the rubrics for you but I am not comfortable with the program yet. I am only at a one on the rubric (laughs).

JM: So it seems that there is a steep learning curve for the students to wrap their heads around this (FA), and also the teachers and parents as well.

DF: It is a big learning curve for teachers because we have to justify everything that we are doing. And then to have to explain this to twenty-seven upset parents because you don’t have a sheet of marks to show them when they come for interviews... I think that Red Cross swimming has it down to a science. “Here are the six things that your kid has to do to pass this level. Oh, look, they aren’t doing the flutter kick quite right, so we’ll work on that some more until they get it to the top of the rubric.” Then they move on. It is just common sense. Now we do have an enormous amount of learning objectives. But if your kid cannot tread water for three minutes, they will not pass and nobody cares that the kids are all the same age in that group. Sometimes I wonder if we have done a disservice to system by doing that (age alike classes). There should be skill groupings as opposed to age groupings for everything we do in school. Socially kids do benefit from being with their age appropriate peers, but if we are doing AFL I could have any age group of kids in my class to do it properly.

RV: True.

DF: In the skills that I am teaching, I have some kids who would benefit from being back a couple of grades relearning mechanics in writing for example, and I have some kids I could promote a little further. The rubrics help them to develop that.

JM: You mentioned the Nelson math program and having to justify twenty-seven times your student assessments, and the board mandates that you teach that particular program, do you receive any support or marketing materials, for lack of a better term, that can help to communicate to parents?

DF: Well the program has canned letters in it, but our report cards still have the class average and student average in it. So they want you to be able have the student go through the process and to understand what they are doing and then respond to a key question that you would mark on a rubric. But when it comes to report card time, parents do not read my comments for one thing. I use the comments right out of the Nelson math program and there are no marks associated with Nelson math at all. Truly it is a matter of the student having gone through the process for the key question or they did not get it. There are also levels that they can progress through. I don't know how you give a kid a 95% on a math quiz, then. Parents just want to know what they got (the score) in math.

RV: The other issue is that a lot of the assessment that comes with Nelson, and there are tests that come too, almost all of it involves an interview with each child. They have to be able to explain to you how did they do this. To organize and orchestrate that kind of thing is seriously challenging

DF: Yes. Yes.

RV: I can each day interview a couple of children's progress, but my record keeping system isn't quite up to this, or maybe I'm not quite up to this, but it is really hard for me to be able to say, "Yes, Susie can explain exactly to me how she did this," and have it be logical and make sense. And to then apply a rubric to that which is the ideal scenario. She could partially explain to me how she does this.

JM: Is that program and AFL, then, something that would be better suited for teachers who are not doing elementary or middle school the way we do it where you teach 13 different subjects to the same group of kids? Would that be better for a...?

RV: A specialist. I suspect so.

DF: Well, I'll tell you, I have taught math for a long time and I am failing at it with this program. I do not have enough background and I don't have enough experience with it. I use fewer manipulatives for understanding with this program than I did when I used to teach math my way. The parents keep referring to it as the new math. I keep thinking that math is not new. It is just some new ways of looking at it. Saying that though, with the focus on AFL as opposed to assessment of learning I think it is great.

RV: Of course.

DF: AFL can support what we are doing. I just don't want to dump everything else that we are doing. You cannot do it (AFL) with thirty-two kids in the classroom. It is designed for the altruistic kids who are intrinsically motivated to do well and get better. In thirty-three years of teaching, we have always done that. What you hope these kids are going to leave your classroom with is the fact that they will be lifelong learners. They are going to be able to move through a learning process. Well, guess what? That doesn't happen. The reality is that are only two or three in this class (students in this year's class) who fit that profile. So the AFL is great. We set it up so that the kids who want to enrich themselves can just go and work with the AFL.

RV: It is unsupervised structure for those who want to do well. It gives them the tools. It gives them the steps. It gives them the structure.

DF: Yes.

RV: And, lots of kids love that structure. But you are right the ones who love that structure and respond to it are already motivated. But if Freddy is not motivated...

DF: If he is not motivated by the marks, then he is not likely to be motivated by moving through the learning process either.

JM: He is likely motivated by one thing, say racing cars...

DF: Yes, and also to just be out of school. That sounds quite negative, but that is where we struggle even with this new math program. We are trying to teach understanding and learning first, and who can argue with that? You want the kids to understand what they are doing, but...it is one of those things when stacked up against issues like class size, student behaviour, special needs and all of those things, it does challenge the teacher.

JM: Yeah.

DF: And, if AFL is not going to be integrated into what they want us to do on report cards, then they need to change it (report cards).

RV: Now, with that said, it (AFL) is still a very useful tool. In the subject areas I have used it – language arts and social studies, it is very useful for making it very clear exactly what the expectations are, exactly what the students need to do and for the students to take some ownership, because they are able to create their own evaluative tool and they like that. They like knowing that I am going to be marked on this because we decided, that this was important. They do not recognize my hand guiding that all of the time, but it does give them an opportunity for ownership.

DF: And when they say you need two sources in your bibliography for a research project, and they do not include two sources, they do not argue about it because they have come up with that.

RV: Precisely.

DF: Sometimes you have to guide them. Sometimes I trump them. Some of them will be pretty unreasonable. It does help when you do the evaluation with kids. It does help them see that you are not just throwing them down the stairs and then assigning numbers based on the step the assignment falls.

RV: They realize that it is objective and not subjective. That it is not a case in which I got 82% because the teacher likes me.

DF: Exactly. That is a good point. Or, his was longer and will get a better mark.

RV: Yes.

DF: Or, the complaint that another student used a bigger font to make it seem like a longer assignment. Truly we get down to some of the pickiest things when they do rubrics. But that is going to be an expectation when they get further on in the learning process and in their academic careers.

JM: That is very true. When I submit my thesis it has to meet some very rigid criteria and if it does not, it will be rejected.

DF: Then they will say you are only at a one, honey, you have to work a little harder.

JM: Is it the mechanics or content that is weak?

All: Laughter

DF: I think that I have done more AFL in a way than I have realized.

RV: I agree. I think that I modified it enough to suit me. It is very short and to the point. It is not the long drawn out process it was when we first learned it two years ago. I remember that the consultant took an entire afternoon to go through the process with my class. It has gotten shorter and more concise every single time. I do worry a little bit that I have shortened to the point where they (Said in unison with DF) don't feel the same ownership. I have to remind myself to keep the students involved with the initial brainstorming.

DF: That is why I try to make them all encompassing like our reader's response journals. We do our first one so that they share and we then use it for the whole year. If you are doing a monthly or weekly reader's response it is ready to use. For personal response journals we have one, research posters, we also do that, but I am not setting up a rubric with the students for every assignment.

JM: So do you think that you could do the same for phys. ed. and state that these are the general expectations, but within each unit or lesson there can be more specific learning objectives provided?

Both: Yes.

JM: You (to RV) mentioned that you are using FA and student involved assessment mostly in social studies and language arts. Do you think that is primarily because you tend to be more of a humanities type of person?

RV: Yes. Those are my strengths. Those are the subjects that I feel most comfortable teaching therefore they are the ones in which I am more of a risk taker.

DF: More confident...

RV: More willing to forgo those "traditional evaluations." That is unlike math and science, where I am little stuck and rely on more traditional methods.

DF: Science and math can overlap. For example a lab lends itself to a really effective rubric that can be established with the kids' involvement.

RV: You are right. I have not done that yet...

DF: I set them up in science just so the kids had a formal assessment tool to follow. Science, social studies, language arts are easy to do. Math is...

RV: Still a tough one for me...

DF: Yes, I am still struggling with math. I think that is largely because our whole mindset is changing.

RV: And, that is not to say that I don't mark math based on a process. I just have not used a rubric to do it.

DF: I still use some pretty traditional methods as well. Did you get the right answer? Because if you got the right answer, chances are your process is pretty good.

JM: Yeah, but I remember having a conversation in one of my classes this past year and we talked about math and when we came to actually understand math. I had to admit that I did not understand math until I was forced to teach it.

DF: That is why I thought that I was doing a good job of teaching understanding of math because I was not a strong math student. I can go through the pictures and the manipulatives. Then I can explain why a negative plus another negative is still a negative number. I can go through that with my students and that is because I had to learn it that way myself.

RV: And you have had to teach it that way to yourself.

DF: So, any other important questions? Can we answer anything else?

JM: Do you have to go?

DF: I'm fine for another five minutes. I'll just speed through the school zones. It's ok constable, I'm a teacher...

All: Laughter.

JM: do find that there is a great deal of support within the division? I mean we are hearing that there is a lot of emphasis being placed on AFL. Is there a lot of support, are you offered any help in the form of additional time, or personnel to come in and assist you?

RV: Not any more.

JM: OK, I know it is June.

RV: In the beginning, a couple of years ago when we decided as a school that this was a task we were going to take on, yes. There was lots of support we were provided with resources, we were given access to consultants who would come in and help us.

DF: But that was a school wide thing.

RV: It was definitely a school wide thing. As our focus changed we have been left on our own.

DF: I think that support would come if we see a move on the report card. Because that is always my question about assessment for learning. If we truly want to move to AFL in everything we do as teachers, which makes total sense, then we need to completely change: a) we need to educate parents, b) we need to start right from kindergarten in educating our student that way, so that when they come into our classrooms they are not looking for the A, B, C grades or percentages. Then what should we do for our students in high schools? What about the university systems? If you come out of a high school in the rural setting or a Saskatoon school and have a 90% average, they do not care how you got that 90% average. They just put it into their computer and the people with the highest averages get in. Or, they are granted interviews because they had the highest average. Kids, even at university, will pick those professors who give out high marks. Kids in high school will select teachers who do not give them too much work and who are generous with their marks. I am not sure how you move to make it perfect.

RV: More universal.

DF: And we never will. I guess that's why you hope that teachers incorporate assessment with the kids. And adapt it to fit their needs...

RV: And it is one of many tools.

DF: Yes.

RV: It is one thing that you use and it doesn't have to be everything.

DF: I am going to use AFL for behaviour. I have not used it for behaviour in the past. I will use the fish philosophy – I am going to set up the rules for the classroom and I am going to set up a rubric and have the kids mark it every week. I will have them assess where they fit on this behavioural continuum each week. I am finding that it is very frustrating on the continuum of behaviour in the grade seven classroom that it has gone down. It started out high and by now it is low. There is no excuse for that, except that the kids don't perceive the decline.

JM: I did something similar to that when we did our aquatics unit. We picked five areas like the change room, pool deck, in the water, and so on, and then had the kids assess how they felt they behaved in those specific areas. It seemed to work pretty well. It would be interesting to see how it works over the course of a school year.

DF: I would be really specific. I would spend several days developing it with the kids. I would have it fairly simple, perhaps four levels. You don't need much progression – you are either talking when the teacher is talking or you are not. Are you facing forward...I would let the kids work that one out and see what they can come up with. I am always learning and assessing what I do. (Chuckles). I see the advantages in doing that with the class.

RV: Especially with student behaviour. They would take more ownership over that if they have helped to create it. They would buy into it.

DF: Then I will tell the kids that this is what I will use for the front page of your report card and you are going to have to fill it in every week and I'll keep track of it. The kids are their own hardest critics. If you have them do an actual evaluation, probably half of them are harder on themselves than the teacher would be. Then there are those who have the totally inflated, way out of line, ideas. So it would be good to see if they can be realistic and be real about where they fit. I don't think that some are wearing the right glasses.

JM: So, self-assessment is the ultimate objective, then?

DF: It would be for me.

RV: Absolutely. That is one way in that this technique leads to better success than anything else we could do.

DF: Yes.

RV: That is we need to teach them how to self-assess.

DF: And to set their own goals. We try that, too. We tell what we need to cover for the term, and ask them to set some goals, and then reset them. We do that for literacy – in reading. Sometimes though, again you have to be firm in having reluctant students set goals. But that is part and parcel in dealing with kids.

RV: I'm going to read two comic books in one year will not be a high enough goal...

JM: So when it comes things like that with the kids, do you also spend any time working through the content that you think will be important to learn? Or that you think that they might want to learn?

DF: (to RV) well you do the t-charts all the time.

JM: Everybody talks about the curriculum guides as just being over the top full of content.

DF and RV: Yes.

JM: And it is impossible to get through it anyway.

RV: Yes.

JM: So do you ever spend any time paring it down with the kids?

RV: We always do KWLs, and in many ways that is a form of paring down the content. It narrows down the knowledge that they already have, what they are interested in. Is that the kind of thing that you meant?

JM: Yes.

DF: But we are also bound by our curriculum. We have a responsibility to teach that curriculum, so within reason we can do that. But, I think that the provincial curriculum is designed with that in mind, and to promote an inquiry approach to learning. That is what I do as a learner. I mean, you are doing assessment for your thesis because you are interested in it.

JM: Yeah.

DF: Who would want to spend (laughter) as much time as that on something that you weren't interested in?

JM: Of course.

RV: For literacy for life this year, we had to set our personal goals. What was our question? So we try to do that with the kids at the start of the year. We ask them "what are your questions?" What are you interested in? What do you want to know? What are we going to find out about? Now, some of that will fit within the curriculum, some of it will extend the

curriculum and some of I will simply force them to learn because it is part of the curriculum. And we have to whether they have come up with it or not.

DF: But with social studies and science we do that a lot. We teach them the some of the content and we give them projects or assignments where they can keep on topic, but explore an area of the topic that is of interest to them. So with assessment, I hope that we would not totally flip. We do a lot of assessment for learning. I think that our Saskatchewan curriculum is really good about setting up kids so that they can do some exploring and enrichment on their own. I would think that most of the teachers that I know would use that approach.

RV: Whether they would use that terminology or call it something else...

DF: Take our focus on literacy. It is really nice when it is publicly announced that we are focusing on this. So when we have our reading logs signed, I can tell parents that my board expects this information from me, and this is not optional. So if a parent comes in and, usually a teacher's kid, (laughter) and wants to know why we need this information, I can say that we are mandated to do this by the board. Like the Nelson math program, I do not have a choice. I know of instances in other schools where the teacher is no longer teaching from the Nelson program.

JM: But can you not pick and choose from that program and supplement from other resources?

DF: We were told to teach it page by page and chapter by chapter to start with. That is where I found it most frustrating. It does not really go with the provincial curriculum.

JM: Are they renewing the provincial middle level math curriculum?

DF: I think that they are always involved with renewal.

End of interview.

Third Interview Transcription – JE (June 20, 2008)

Introductory portion of interview was accidentally erased.

JE: ...I pay a lot more attention to assessment in my career because of my own interest in learning and the curriculum classes I have taken where we have done a lot of asking why we do certain things. Also as my own children go through school, I see some of the activities that they do and I have done them myself (as a teacher) as well and I think that these are (often) busy work or make work projects and they are things without a really clear objective. So, the assessment of them is not as meaningful. So I am left thinking how do I make my assessment of something meaningful? Where it is not just a mark on a piece of paper and the kids take a look at it and away it goes and vanishes into the nebulous file folder of their school career. That has for been the focus (of my practice) in the last little while. We have been talking about how assessment overlaps literacy and I have been doing a lot of technological literacy projects with my students. Real world applications of language arts for example and how do language arts fit into the real world. You know that it is not (a case where) your job is to read this story and write a review. There are a few people who have that job, but not many.

JM: Reviewers are few and far between.

JE: Yeah, that's not the job that most people will be getting in their life, so I am trying to make language arts real. And then I try to make the assessment real. For example, I am doing digital storytelling with my students. We want to find stories to tell and audiences to tell them to. We want to present our story and get a sense of whether we did do a good job or not. Does the audience like it? If it were to be sold, would somebody buy it? Would somebody be interested in it? If they are not (interested in our stories) then why write them? To me that is the whole assessment process. Was this good, did you guys like it? If you did not like it, what didn't you like so that the next time I do it I won't make that same mistake.

JM: Right.

JE: But what is fascinating is that the kids are not ready for it (formative assessment). They just do not think that way. It is almost as if they want the funeral of the assignment. Here is the assessment (makes a honking noise), you get the stamp and it is done and I can go on to the next thing.

JM: So where does that come from? We all get to parts of day or even our careers where we just want what we are doing to end and go away. Where does that come from for kids? Here we are in our late thirties or early forties and we have lots of experience with that, but where does that come from for a ten year old?

JE: When I was doing that examination of reading practices, I read a book called "Reading Lives," and it was about children and their process of learning to understand literacy from kindergarten to grade two. This person studied their lives and their approach to reading and by grade one these kids had already started to figure out where they fit in the school plan. For

example, this boy in kindergarten, great kid, really active, loved NASCAR, would tell a story by getting up and acting it out. Now, I am thinking as a grade eight teacher, ah-ha, would I love to have kids who say, “I have a story to tell you. Let me show you.” Then have them actually get up and tell the story – and the kid is running around the class. I can just picture a big grade eight kid. You would love it.

JM: Depending on the kid.

JE: And the timing – right in the middle of math class (chuckles). But that whole enthusiasm for the story and the telling of it, you can’t but question how to channel this into something productive so that the next time we do something, we can do it in a different genre – other than NASCAR. This kid who wants to only talk about NASCAR is pretty limited in terms of what he is going to get (out of an assignment). Anyhow, this kid by grade one, had already figured out that the teachers did not want him to get out of his desk, they did not want him to run around and tell his story, they did not want him to make noises. This whole set of expectations that is based on (nothing more than) how do you get through the day with twenty-five or thirty kids in desks? How do you get through six-hour days with these people and maintain some sanity? Like that whole daily grind thing. So a lot of it becomes, “here is an assignment, did you do ok on it? Here is a spelling test, how many correct did you get?”

My son did this one giant project, and this was, in my opinion, really bad assessment. He got this project where he was to make a five part thing about the Yukon. Make a poster, make a brochure, write a short story, and create a children’s book. It was like this teacher wanted to cover the whole semester or the entire reporting period with this one project. The marking sheet had (approximately) seventy-three marks on it – or some strange number. It (the scoring) was three for this (component of the assignment) and two for this and four for this, and so on. I was looking at the sheet wondering if there was a discernable pattern. The answer was no. How does a kid look at this and think, “So the next project I have to do I will work on this (aspect of the project to improve). There was none of that. It simply was do your Yukon project, get your mark and, what? My wife and I put a lot of energy into this because our son is not a hugely artistic person in the sense of drawing and cutting and pasting. He was really stressed about this. So we wanted to help him. Then we ended up doing it with him. I am doing all of the desktop publishing, my wife is doing all of the cut and paste – not all, but we are sitting at the table with him while he is working on the project. We did not put any of the words down but we would prompt him when he wrote a poor statement, with something like, “What does this statement really mean? What would be a better way to say it?” I remember sitting there thinking, “Dear Lord, I hope that I never give one of those (assignments) out to children,” because it was just too cruel.

JM: That is interesting because in another conversation that I had with a teacher, he indicated that he was doing more conferencing with students. He’ll spend five or ten minutes talking with them to find out what they know or what they are supposed to know and he tried a technique in which during a student presentation he took the report away from them. The students did not have any reference. Then he simply said, tell me what you know about the culture you studied. He said that the students knew nothing. They had the jot notes, they had the report and they had the poster. They had all of this stuff, but they still knew nothing. It is

as if kids, for whatever reason, when we do that, that old school style of marking, there is nothing there. Absolutely nothing.

JE: When we did a culture fair at our school, it was my job to ride shotgun. I was making sure that the culture fair people were staying at the culture fair and the people who were visiting weren't eating too much, all of that kind of stuff. I was security. That was my professional position. I would walk up to students and say, "so, tell me about this steel drum." This one particular student had a steel drum. She was not a big attender (had attendance issues) then all of a sudden, she shows up with this great presentation including this steel drum.

"My uncle made it," she said.

I followed up with, "how did he make it?"

She replied, "I don't know."

"He just gave it to you and he did not tell you anything about it?" I asked.

"Nope," she replied.

Ok, that is really useful to have around your display. So what else can you tell me about Jamaica, or whatever your culture is...

JM: A steel drum – a great addition to your Norway display.

JE: (laughs). And the Viking helmet also compliments the Jamaica display. I went around and asked a few kids who had produced some things that were really interesting. Those kids were interested in it. And because of their interest, they had paid attention to some of the stuff (content and process) that had transpired (during the project) and they could explain that. On the other hand, I have always wondered when I ask kids questions as a teacher, how intimidated are they by me as I am talking to them? So I am always trying to figure out a way to get them "un-intimidated" and sharing what they have learned.

I did this thing this year where I had them tell me their ancestor's stories grandparents, and so on. I then wanted them to compare their ancestor's lives to their own lives. I am motivated by this whole thing where you find out about your roots and you get your grandparents to tell you stories, or write them down for you. In particular, stories about their childhoods. It can be a very powerful experience for kids. But I wanted these kids to then build on this. My class did not want to do this. They did not want to expose themselves, and they did not want to share about their grandparents. It was almost as if there is a level of shame in the Aboriginal community and in working class neighbourhoods – where they are from to where they are asked to share that information (at school). I was a little bit surprised at that because I have been working really hard at making our class a safe place. And everybody else seemed to be in the same place. I had a kid whose parents were from Ethiopia or Sudan, and his roots seemed to be very similar to those of an Aboriginal family or a working class family. It was like the family whose father was ex-military and he now works at the dump and his daughter has no difficulty in saying, "my dad works at the dump." But, because she looks around and realizes that nobody here is going to make fun of that because everybody here is either poor or parents are grunting it out to somehow make ends meet. I was quite shocked that they did not want to share their stories with each other. I said (to them) that it was an oral presentation and that was the cumulative assessment of this whole thing. I wanted them to just tell me about it. And I wanted them to tell the whole class. They did not want to. They did not want

to produce any stories, they did not want to video tape any interviews. Nobody went for those kinds of things. So I basically ended up sitting in the hallway with a student and their jot notes and they ended up telling me their grandparents' stories. And it was usually very well done, but I found that whole thing about being intimidated and sharing to be a real eye opening experience for me. As I mature as a teacher and my own children go through school, I realize how intimidating the school process can be for them. They can be quite freaked out by it.

JM: So what is about the school process that intimidates kids?

JE: At one point, I think it is because they are really afraid about finding out what they are really bad at it. They don't know what they are really good at yet. They are developing that sense of I am really good at this. But in the meantime they don't want to have any disastrous experiences. Like my son will work his tail off to get that good mark in grade nine. What does that mark mean? I keep saying that to him. Like if you got a 60 on it (shoulder shrugs) who cares?

JM: What does it mean when he gets to grad school?

JE: It doesn't mean – it means even less then. There is a way that high school builds that whole need for marks. So that by grade twelve those marks really determine the number of open doors you have or the number of dollars you get in your scholarship, or whatever it is. There is some sort of price attached to marks as you approach grade twelve. And so, it is clear that in grade eight, especially for him, in a high socio-economic status neighbourhood, the grade eight mark race was reinforced by the teaching staff. The staff was saying this stuff. He would come home and ask if it was true that your marks determine your high school placement – that your marks will determine what high school you can go to and what classes you can take. And one day he came home and asked, "Dad, is this true?" I said no. That is not true. It will influence people's suggestions to you. It will influence whether they say you should go to City Park or I think you should go to Nutana, or we think you should take modified programming. It will influence that conversation and that opinion, but it will not influence where you actually go. Those marks will not do that because it is all based on parental choices. The school division here is very sensitive to what parents want for their kids, so they are not going to say, "No, you cannot come here." If a parent wants his child to come somewhere unless it is a limited number program like the outdoor school or the media school or ACTAL, something like that where they can actually say that there is no more room, but you can go here.

JM: Doesn't that in and of itself, in a public educational institution setting seem contradictory? In a public setting, if they offer it for one, don't you think that is only reasonable that anybody who is qualified and wants to go to a specific program should go?

JE: Yeah. And you know I think that the process can play itself out for a bit. You do not have to be highly recommended. You can muscle your way in. I heard the story of a parent who wanted their child in this particular advanced program. The teacher said that it was not a good idea. Despite the contrary recommendation the kid actually went into this program

because they (school division) did not want to fight the parents on it. There was a kid in my class who came from out of the city and they missed the grade four CTBS and the CAT/3. So, they were not given a score to determine their destiny. So, the student came to me in grade seven and presented me a note from her parents that stated, 'we want child to be assessed for the ACTAL program at Greystone School for grade eight'. I had never had that request before. Kids either went to ACTAL due to some magical process long before I got them or they have turned it down.

JM: Or they have come back.

JE: Yeah. So, because I have only taught grades six, seven and eight I have never actually had a kid do this. It is usually in grade four that the assessment is made. Therefore it is usually in grade five that the choice to move to the ACTAL program is made. They look at the scores and say 'wow' and go on to this magical program. So this kid asks for this assessment. And it creates quite a to do. I had no idea what to do with this request, who to speak to and how to proceed. I went to the resource teacher and she said she would help assess this student with some of the testing materials that she had available. The tests were intended to give me a sense of her academic talents at this point in time in a standardized form.

JM: Right.

JE: Now, we could at this point crack open standardized tests, but I don't know if you do...

JM: Not today.

JE: She scored well in everything except math. I submitted the form and stated what I knew about this student, and she got in to the ACTAL program. So there are some destinies that are altered by grades and marks and things like that for grade eight or grade nine or whatever. But for your average student who wants to go through the system and have as many open doors as they want, those grades aren't that important. And especially in grade nine, they become less important except maybe in that there is some talk about this change between the idea of failing and not failing. You know that in grade eight we don't really fail students. But then in grade nine they are able to fail students in terms of 'you did not complete grade nine math, so you cannot go onto grade ten math until you complete grade nine math.' So students could be stuck in that particular subject for a while until they figure out how to get through it. But, other than that, those grades don't really mean anything. And yet, my son still feels that it is really important to perform well even if it is on a Shakespeare test by getting me, a Shakespeare scholar from my university days to help him. I think that this is really funny, because if you just do this yourself, get a sixty, you do not have to get a ninety.

JM: Is a sense of competition being influenced by his peer group? Because he is at that age where his peers are going to have typically more influence over him and his decisions than his parents will. So is he being influenced by some falsehoods that surround assessment that have permeated his peer group?

JE: There is that for sure. When you get kids who do not want to be in “Read to Succeed” which is the special program for kids who are struggling with language arts, because they do not want to be seen as dumb. What I find fascinating in my community school is the kids – my read to succeed kids are smart, they have just gotten caught in the cracks of the programming, so they do not fit the assessment that is being done. So I will give them a project that does not fit the assessment scheme of old. And they do great. I have had these kids get 100% on a fraction test and on a geometry test with some help. Because I do not do assessment like I used to. Here is your test, you get no help, you cannot call a friend, you have no lifelines. Away you go. They have typically bombed those types of tests. But these boys, because they are in read to succeed, they are exempted from science and social studies and these assignments are coming due. I am trying to put together final grades, and I am putting some pressure on them to motivate them to get some work done. I have one of my smart guys ask, “how do I get into this read to succeed class?” Another student replied, “you gotta act dumb for a while.”

JM: What I am extracting from your statements is that there is this perception that we are giving kids the message that the end result is important and it is not the fact that they are in school to learn and that in all probability those read to succeed kids and the kids who are in some modified or remedial programming are probably, relative to the rest of the kids learning more. We do not tend to put that emphasis on that aspect. It seems to me we are giving everyone an unclear message as to what the purpose of school is and therefore a shitty look at assessment.

JE: I think that is a good point. There is a clouded message as to what the purpose of school is. I think that we as teachers struggle with that. We have a clouded view of what school is. Parents have a clouded view of what school is. Administrators have a clouded view of what school is. And our clouds are not synchronized. They are different clouds so often times we teachers feel our job is management. Parents will often feel that their job is to build up their children and to encourage them, and to rescue them at all costs from all damage and hurt. We have administrators, mysterious beings that they are, I don’t even want to reflect on what they think the education process is because it will get too clouded. I think of the camp that I just came back from. I was thinking about assessment from the camp because we did a number of educational sessions. We did a hike through the aquatic zone of the environment, we did the forest and dune zones and we had some questions to answer and we wanted them to journal.

JM: Isn’t a hike through an aquatic zone more properly called a swim?

JE: Laughs, perhaps, therein lies the problem... Actually we aren’t allowed to swim without a lifeguard, so we called it a hike to get around that issue.

JM: Ah. So liability is getting in the way of everything.

JE: Yes and our assessment is based on what we can claim that we were actually supposed to be able to do. Anyway. We walked on the beach. That is what I meant to say. I wondered how best to assess these activities. What were we attempting to achieve? We had groups and we

discussed cooperation, working with your group. We were talking about becoming observant scientists. But at the end of the day, we did not have enough time to really follow through. For example, it was not possible to ask questions such as, “what were you observing?” and “how effective were you at observing?” Why was this so problematic? It was because there were so many distractions. I had kids who were out all night. I am assuming that they were out all night long. I could hear some howling off in the distance. I wondered if I was to get up in the middle of the night and run around and see who was out. The bottom line is that I was not sure how much sleep some of my students got. They were not rude or disrespectful to each other. If they snuck out, they did so awfully silently. But I saw these kids were really tired. I was not letting them nap or have any down time. When you think about an educational experience and you have these kids who are falling over, kids who are super excited, or whatever, you have this wide variety of experiences that these kids are having while you are doing the hike through the aquatic zone. So, how do you assess whether kids are paying attention, whether or they are getting anything out of it, or whether or not they are putting in any effort to their work. Then what do you do with that information?

So if I was to ask a student, “have you written anything down?”

Student: “No.”

Teacher: “Why not?”

Student: “I do not care about this.”

Teacher: “Why not?”

Student: “This is camp and it should be fun. This is boring.”

What do I do with this piece of information I have gotten from the conversation? We are at school. What is our purpose here? Are you here to learn? I am trying my best to make this a great and fun activity. We are only doing things for forty-five minutes. Can you please give me your time? You know – these daily grind issues for me, become as important to consider in the assessment process as anything. Here I am at the lake and it is a beautiful day and the kids are interested in looking at the leech in the water. Other kids are trying to drag me off into the forest to look at an owl they have found. We were wondering if it was male or female and we had no idea how to sex it. There were all of these cool conversations. But, how do you assess any of that? Did I have a scheme to assess it? No. The scheme that I had was to have the students make some observations and then communicate them to me. That broke down because we ran out of time and needed to pack up, get on the bus go home. Then kids are primarily concerned with being dismissed as soon as they get back to the school. Then, do I really want to show up Monday morning and ask kids for their jot notes? They will not have them for a variety of reasons. So it now becomes, what is the assessment for that? It is now a zero. What is that?

JM: So, it would probably be a neat time for me to ask to what extent do you involve the kids in designing assessment strategies and assessment criteria?

JE: Theoretically, I try and involve them all the time. But when I ask for their involvement I get a huge variety of light bulbs coming on. When we did video production and digital story telling I tied assessment into things they know and do outside of school. When they are able to get a handle on it they say, “I know what I like, I know what is good, I know what looks

good, I know what sounds good,” they are able to articulate that stuff and I write it on the board. Then I’ll say, “let’s look for this.” We did not do the assessment of digital storytelling for a grade. For me it was an experiment in understanding how to do it (digital storytelling) and not have it tied into their language arts marks so that those marks would be dragged down. I was concerned that technical difficulties would unfairly penalize a student. But on the other hand, I got some really good authentic assessment from them. For example, “I really like this because it was well written and the kids were funny.” And, “I could hear everything really well.” But when I do other things and I say, “we are going to design a house and we are putting it on grid paper, what are we looking for?” They give me these blank stares. I am looking for elements such as the door, walls, and rooms. I struggle with how to convince them that they have something to contribute.

JM: The digital stories you did not do for grades, but was there a grade attached to the house project?

JE: We did self-assess on that piece, and the other pieces that came out of that were applied to a four point system. Each point is equal to 25%. It also coincides with the report card descriptors of ‘not yet meeting,’ ‘beginning to meet,’ ‘meeting,’ and ‘excelling.’ I said to the kids that 75% is meeting expectations. That is what I am looking for. That is what a 75% means. That is what three out of four means. You are giving me everything to meet my expectations. Four out of four is the ‘wow.’ I did that because I really believe that the nickel and diming and the inflation often attached to marks is really detrimental. Then kids ask, “Can I get an extra mark for this?” To which I respond, “Why? What did you learn? What did we do?” The other thing for me was that my job is becoming simpler. Unlike the heinous Yukon project my son did, I will now have to justify 73 marks. What a horrendous job. If you give me what I want (quality of product) it is 75%. If you “wowed” me, four out of four will be the result. It is really easy. Either you have done what I have asked and you have learned, or you have not. And in math I do the same thing. Some kids will take, because I teach grade seven and eight, I have learning objectives for two different grades. The grade eight objectives are often more challenging than the grade seven objectives. But I’ll have these grade sevens experience wow moments.

Fractions are a great example. The kids reduce really complex fractions to simplest form or they make equivalent fractions or they are answering word problems and they make really cool connections to things and they will answer questions in a way that I have not thought of. When they do that and show creativity and wow, it is really easy for me to throw on the extra mark or say that something is awesome. Kids in my son’s class for example, expect it (the extra mark). If you gave them a 75% they would be insulted and think that you were putting them down. So for my students, right from the very first day, especially coming back after my educational leave, I came in thinking that I was going to make assessment easier for me to do. And I am going to make it meaningful by eliminating the petty mark-grab. The mark-grab thing for me was having the kids hand in work early and put in extra effort on the title page and do something that was creative (aesthetically). I would say to the students they could always add to their project some meaningful things. We often would talk about those things together. That is how I have handled assessment this year.

I am trying to make the whole assessment process more like real life. For example, when you go to work, you do not necessarily get paid more for the extra effort. But you can ‘wow’ your bosses. I often get that from people I work with. They will offer compliments on aspects of my performance. Usually, in our jobs, that is good. If we are here, on time and doing our job, we get a pay cheque. It is good. We do not solicit how good it is – is it really good, an 80% good or higher? We do not do that. We have this zone of good.

JM: Is it fair then to paraphrase by saying that the perception among teachers is that school is not broken so there is no need to fix it? There is really nothing to change so we can keep doing what we have been doing for the last hundred years?

JE: I don’t get that. I get a feeling that people are worried about what is happening in schools. Parents are worried about new things that we do and whether or not those things will pan out. There are new pushes for trends and things that happen in schools. I do not spend a lot of time teaching spelling, for example. Doing spelling lists. My daughter brings home spelling lists every week and we work on the spelling sheets and she hands them in. when I think of learning to read and write and to spell that was never a thing for me. There was no connection for me. I did my spelling lists really well so I became a better reader and writer. My wife dutifully helps my daughter with her spelling lists. My daughter is excellent at spelling and often gets 100% even when she forgets to show us the spelling lists. But my son, never got stuff like that and he still struggles with the spelling of words and the pronunciation of words. But for him it is a lifelong process like it is with me.

For example, if I am working with a long Word document or even writing on the board, I have to ask, “how do I spell received?” often Word will correct it, or I’ll grab a dictionary because leaving it spelled incorrectly makes me look like a dough head. But I don’t teach spelling lists. I had a girl in my class, that ACTAL girl I was telling you about earlier. She asked why we did not do spelling lists. I said that it was because you would do really well on spelling lists. You would get 100% on spelling lists, I bet. She replied that she would. So, I asked her why she needed to get spelling lists. All she could reply with was that she wanted 100%. She just wanted some activity that she could get 100% on. Meanwhile, the rest of my class would have bombed the spelling lists and felt like dough heads as a result of something that is completely unrelated to the real world such as their writing and how well they are communicating. When I mark their writing, I ask how well did you communicate? Then I look at how well they followed the rules of English. Those rules of English are never as important as how well you have communicated. After all you can hire a secretary for minimum wage to correct your spelling or to throw it through a word processor. For me, I see parents who are worried about math programs. They are also worried that we are ditching traditional things. For some parents they feel that if a particular program worked for them, it will work for their kids. I think that is wrong.

JM: What kinds of things are we ditching?

JE: Spelling lists, handwriting. I just don’t think that I am good at teaching handwriting. I am really lousy at handwriting. I would be a lousy model and a consistently poor assessor of

handwriting. Some of these traditional elements that we are doing away with, parents are having trouble giving up.

On the math front I think that we are throwing babies out with bath water. Because we are creating, or writing or using math programs that make math more challenging for students to understand because it is more demanding on their literacy skills and their reading and all of that kind of stuff. It is not as intuitive as some of the older math programs. So, the famous example is the Math Quest textbook. This year because I have a grade seven and eight split, we have a new math textbook. It asks the kids to read examples. I'll have kids who will ask me what the questions are. I'll reply that there are no questions here. This is an example. It states that this is example number two, there is a story and a picture of kids working on a problem. They will give me a stunned look and respond with "oh, uh, where is the question?" It is on the next page. The kids do not understand how to use the textbook. This is a real conundrum for me. I do not know how to teach that. I feel like these kids have been trained really well to look for the question and that is a bad thing. On the other hand, this math text is not necessarily better because it does not have the same visual representations of math problems that the Math Quest does for example. I can photocopy the Math Quest instruction sheet and almost universally, with very few exceptions, kids will grasp it because it is so visual. The graphics and the layout make sense. With these other programs it is like reading a kid a story-book, and they are trying to understand where the math is within this story. I know philosophically what they are getting at. But it is almost like they are asking us as teachers and students to take two hours out of our day to work through math. We are just not giving up two hours a day. On that front, parents who look at this question its value. You should see my wife when she gets hold of my daughter's Math Focus 4, she will throw it at me and run away. She just cannot deal with it at all. That is fascinating to me because I am torn. I have a bunch of pet peeves over this new math program. But that for me is one of the places where parents are looking and are saying that they do not understand the changes. The last thing they do not understand in terms of my classroom is that I have said that I do not give out homework for homework's sake. I do not make it up. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that homework is counterproductive. And in my school, a community school, I can hardly get kids to come to school. So sending them off with homework is pointless. It is a thing that further alienates them from school.

Do we want to look at any of these questions?

JM: These are just some prompts to get us thinking in terms of assessment. We can do that.

JE: (looking at prompts) I find formal training or, training is a bad word and I use it a lot in my writing. I had a professor who said training is for dogs. Yes, if you want to jump through hoops, but take professional development in assessment...

JM: Yes, but are we members of a profession or are we members of an occupation? When you consider the amount of professional development and the attention paid to current research that is currently available to us, are we really that professional when it comes to those kinds of things compared to say, a doctor? I took a grad class with a guy who did a literature review that found hairdressers spent on average eight to twelve days per year on professional

development and teachers spent three days. So are we really that professional? Is “training” then, an inaccurate word?

JE: Well, then we can ask if hairdressing is a profession or an occupation. I have a friend who is in retail at Whistler, B.C. He makes gobs and gobs of cash sending people around to any kind of seminar that they want to attend; financial planning, personal management, self-help kinds of things. It was interesting this year as part of the literacy for life movement (a SPSD initiative) they had quite a bit of professional development money available. I felt that I used the money and time very well largely because I avoided professional development sessions. Instead, I chose to take time to read materials that interested me. Given some time and direction it made a huge impact on my professional development. The other thing was that we were able to meet together with teachers and discuss and research specific action research questions that were of interest to us. We were given time to just go and work on the question without anyone telling us what to do. We were just able to go and do it. So I think that there are models of professional development are in a state of flux. This is especially true in the public school systems. They are probably deviating from traditional educational models. For example, you (the organization) will decide what the topic is, they pool a group of people together into a room, and they give the teachers that information and it is expected that they will use that information and do something (in the future) with it. And that is exactly what we do with students every single day. And when it happens to us as teachers, we freak out and we realize how stupid and banal it is. And empty. Yet our students are feeling that every single day when we are herding them and managing them through our own educational process. That is a challenge for me as I look at what I like to do and when I have to turn around and then do the opposite to my students I feel really sorry about that. “I am sorry class, because I have to do to you what I hate doing myself.” When we talked about literacy, we talked about the same thing. But assessment is not there yet. We have talked about all of the stuff that leads up to assessment. We were talking about learning to read, sharing our reading and doing read-alouds, and the skills of reading. When I took a class this past term about teaching early reading and how to assess whether or not a student is reading. They showed us how to create a checklist and how to use that as students were reading aloud. It was a performance, an authentic task. I was thinking that I had never had this information at any other point in my career. It is almost like these things that are most important, and the message that we are getting is “do what you know.” Do a final exam, or what ever you like.

The other thing I did for professional development this year that was really interesting was I took the accreditation seminar to be able to write your own grade twelve exams. That was fascinating because their whole push was toward the assessment for learning - the things we do very typically in middle years. This stands in opposition to final exams and mid term exams and final papers. When you think about grade twelve you had a mid term, a final paper, and a final exam. Ta da, you were done. The teacher had a very organized program. Three things. Now they are looking at that and they are saying that departmental exams, when you look at the questions that are presented on departmental exams, short answer, long answer, or essay questions on things like, and this drove me crazy, because they were all sitting there discussing the themes of Shakespeare. Who cares about the themes of Shakespeare?

The other point is, what gives any teacher the right to assess what I think the theme of Shakespeare is? If I was to sit there and say, “this is the theme of Shakespeare to me...” and if it did not fit into their box then what would that mean for my grade? Sure you will have those teachers who will ask, “Can you justify it, and express it using good language?” All of those things. My son had an interesting experience. He was reading *Romeo and Juliet*. The teacher said to the kids, “write the significance of a particular quote down.” My son said to me, that the passage was foreshadowing what was going to happen further on in the play. Shakespeare was giving the audience a clue. I said, that sounds right. I have studied Shakespeare in university. He later said to that the teacher said he was wrong. He, no, I got a zero on that question. I said, “what?” My son stated that he had to refer to the state of mind of the person giving the quote. I asked how that had anything to do with significance? That is not significance. This whole thing about assessment is happening right in my son’s grade nine class. I am there as a parent and as a teacher, and a reflector upon what we do as teachers, and I can only conclude that that is really messed up. That is just another way that the teacher is just going over here, and my son is now thinking that his creative thoughts about *Romeo and Juliet* are a zero. So, why would I continue to write that down on a piece of paper? I might as well leave it blank because I can’t figure out what the (expletive) teacher wants. Then the teacher wants the state of mind and obviously he did not know that before he wrote down the answer, or he would have said to me that it needed to relate to the state of mind of the speaker.

JM: So are we then doing a poor job of communicating expectations?

JE: That teacher was, for sure. But I am thinking in terms of your question, that the teacher was doing what they knew how to do. So that teacher knew what they wanted for that exam. We have all sat in a class where somebody stood in the front and said, this is how you study Shakespeare, this is how you assess Shakespeare. What is this English teacher doing now? She is doing the same thing that an English teacher who is twenty-two or twenty five years old. Right out of university and they threw her into this classroom. It is crazy.

JM: We have both been there as beginning teachers where you are thrown to the wolves and you do what you need to get through the day, the period, whatever. But my whole point in this study is to ask, “What degree of emphasis do we need to place on student involved assessment?” My line of thinking right now is, when my kids are done grade twelve and they are off to university, that they do a much better job of managing themselves and they have better handle on what it means to learn than I did. My university career is a dismal failure. That I was accepted into grad studies is no small miracle. I want my kids to look at whatever it is that they are doing and say, “This is what I need to do to be better. This is what I need to do to take my job to the next level or, to know that they are perfectly at ease with where they are and this is why I am perfectly at ease with where I am.” I want them to be able to assess for themselves what they have done, and how well they are doing at it. And, not just to say it is ok. Isn’t that what we should be striving for?

JE: To me when I think about that assessment, I think in terms of what we really want school to be. Do we want school to be preparation for life, or do we want it to be a firey hoop of

discipline that students must leap through, because right now it is a firey hoop of discipline and they must leap through.

JM: I would agree with that.

JE: It is a set of expectations and it is almost like the military. I went through it and I survived, you got to go through it and you'll survive. If we make it too slack, or change those rules, we get parents up in arms because they are prone to question why if they went through it their kids are not going through it.

Even that whole idea of doctors and that whole intern experience. It is changing and the med students get to actually sleep. What does an experienced doctor think of that? I am thinking that there are so many things we do in education are simply management. Management of people during the day and if we did not have that role what would we have instead of it to motivate students? When I think of that, well take the Romeo and Juliet example, if I was to take that and teach it. The next question I would have to ask is "why?" and "what do I want students to have (knowledge, skills and processes) when they leave?" Isn't that one half of the whole assignment – the assessment? Here is the thing I am going to teach or you decide what you are going to teach and why you are going to teach it. To me that is at least half. The other half is what is the result? What is the thing that comes out of this? What is the learning, what is the product, what is the result?

When I did my grad classes and I conducted video interviews the instructor said we had to do a final project that was a research paper. I said that I did not want to write a paper. I am into making movies and I want to learn more about making movies and I would like to do it like a documentary interview. She approved the project. I came up with a basic framework of what I wanted to do. I conducted my interview and that went really well. That information was then produced into a video. But that video was not what I learned. There is a whole other thing that I learned that I never really go to tell her. She did not specifically ask me for those components of my learning. Some of the learning was not really on topic. A lot of the things that I learned were not about learning to read, the man as reader and as teacher, which was the theme of the assignment.

JM: How then do we take our assessments and what our initial learning objectives are and put those aside and allow the kids to share what they have learned and really demonstrate to the kids that what they have learned is authentic? What you have learned is real, it has meaning and relevance and value even if the only value is you thought it was cool. Or, it was something that you did not know and now you have this knowledge. How do we do that? I would love to have a kid say to me, "I don't fully understand the seven patterns of culture, but here is what I have learned."

JE: Do you know what just struck me now as I was talking about it, is how important assessment is. You know what the problem is with assessment for me? It is the collecting of the data. It is not that I want to have genuine learning experiences with kids. I want them to think about how they learned. This last class, the thing I have learned is going to benefit me in life. I am going to learn something.

(Interview interrupted briefly)

JM: So we were discussing the language of assessment and how people play around with it to suit their own purposes.

JE: And assessment for administrators and for report cards is about the data you can collect. Whereas for me the assessment is, or what it should be is an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned and use it to make course corrections. We could say to a student, "Ok, you are not good at this, what do we need to do to get better at it?" For some people it is avoiding data at all costs and for others it is a case where they need help with a learning objective. I was thinking about the collecting of that data, and how that becomes another one of our management issues. It is exactly like that camp episode I described earlier. The kids learned a whole bunch. How do I assess it? The other question is why do I need to assess it? Why do I need to collect the data on what they have learned from camp? Because really it is their data. They are going to be using it for their lives. Those lessons that I have given to them are a gift. Take them and use it and enjoy life. But we are still caught up in this whole thing, right? We have to produce report cards, we have learning objectives to meet and we need to be able to say, "yes they can or cannot do this objective."

JM: Are we too hung up on proving that whatever it is we do during the course of a day, week or month has to be demonstrated?

JE: Absolutely.

JM: And we don't realize that for some, if not all of these kids, the process of (middle school) education is not going to yield any fruit until ten or twenty years have elapsed.

JE: Absolutely. You know what freaked me out this year? We were at one of the literacy for life conferences and we were discussing early literacy development and boys. The book was entitled, "Even Hockey Players Read," or something like that. The author was being sarcastic, but he was walking into an airport waiting room and a professional hockey team was waiting there also. He noticed that every single person on that team was reading. The whole hockey team was reading. This author was astounded by that sight. Anyhow, during the literacy for life session, I said to somebody that the first person who really spurred me to read was my grade eight language arts teacher. She was a short, little cute girl. She was just a young teacher. One of my friends at the time wanted to make her cry. He wanted to have power trip because he had a dysfunctional life. He made her cry one day and I just stood there. I did not do anything or say anything. I was a bit of a spineless twit.

JM: Well, that is grade eight, though.

JE: She never knew that she was the one who got me hooked on "The Lord of the Rings." Now I am a grad student, I love reading and I have read Lord of the Rings about twelve times. My roommate and I used to read them aloud to each other because we a couple of virgin geeks who played Star Trek games - (laughs) under our blankets. (Laughs).

JM: Did you have Star Wars sheets?

JE: No, just a light saber. Anyhow. (Laughs) But, she never knew that she had such a significant influence on me. I felt compelled to find this woman. I had to tell her that thirty years later that I had this revelation and that she never knew. I realized that this was my life, too. I am teaching all of these kids and I may bump into them at high school or they may come back to visit and tell me I was great, and that they loved doing a particular project. But in all likelihood the majority of them won't. They won't come back and tell what they have learned. They won't come back and tell me what they liked and what they did not like. You know what? I think that is real life. I think that this whole idea of us needing to be accountable as teachers is a movement that is built on a false pretense that we are spending time with people as teachers and spending time with people as children and leading them and helping them grow is a waste of time. What they (students) need are tangible skills at every stage of their life. And it is based on this concept that we can blame education for economic problems.

That is a long journey that I went through this past year reading post Marxist theories of education. Which is pretty bizarre for a right wing Albertan like myself. This whole idea of holding education responsible for the economy...look, we are never given credit for the economy. But if we have problems with people or workers who are not doing their jobs, and people are unemployed, and people have low levels of literacy it is because the schools are doing something wrong. And then schools scramble and teachers scramble around trying to solve these problems. Would we blame doctors if people started getting more and more sick, or started smoking? I just thought that it is a really crazy connection that has been made.

JM: On that topic, we do not blame doctors now if disease rates go up but if our health care system was predicated on prevention instead of looking after people when they were sick, then we would blame doctors if disease rates went up. That is if doctors were really responsible for ensuring the population was healthy. And they are not (held accountable). We generally only go to see the doctor when there is something wrong. We do not go to the doctor and say, "I am feeling good. What can I do to improve?" "What do I need to do to make myself feel better than I feel now?"

JE: But even if you had a fitness trainer, and said that you wanted to be fit and strong or had other specific goals in mind, and you worked to achieve those goals and then dropped dead of a heart attack it would be hard to take that fitness trainer to court unless they were obviously negligent in their job and did not monitor your physical condition and complaints. This is because there are so many factors that influence a person's future. For example, my V.P. asked me, "Do you think some of your kids do not attend school because of your program and what you are doing?" My response was to state that he knew better that I did what the kids in my community would respond to. But when I look at my kids in my classroom that are not coming to school, they have a variety of things going on in their lives that have nothing to do with me. Or, if it has something to do with me it is not the fact that I am their teacher.

JM: Do you mean as an agent of the system?

JE: Yes. I thought about that for a while and I felt like that was such a typical “administrative” question. “What are you doing in your classroom that is making students stay at home?” Nothing. Why are they illiterate? It really isn’t because I’m not doing my job. But on the other hand when we consider some of the other things we do in school, some of those things do set up the atmosphere and attitude school. I really think that that is a complex question. And it does not come down to whether or not we did enough spelling tests and if we marked them or not. Do we collect enough data? I really think that is like rearranging the pictures on the wall during a fire. As if we will be able to then say that things are looking good. I think that we have bigger problems to address. For example I would love to change many things to help meet student needs. Right at the end there I was thinking that when we think about assessment as teachers we are really just thinking about data collection. The assessment is “can you prove that a person has learned the lessons that you have been teaching?” Whenever I hear that it is an instinct I have that makes me respond with a definitive, “Absolutely not.” There is no way that I can prove that anyone has learned anything from any of my lessons. But I can kind of find some numbers in some sort of process that makes it look like I can. That is what I am thinking.

JM: So why don’t we then turn that around when that question is asked? Or if it asked, tell them to ask the students? Go ask them what they have learned?

JE: It is an interesting thing because in our system, I think, elementary teachers are held more accountable than others. Maybe it is going to change with what is called “Collegiate Renewal,” in the high schools where they are trying to motivate high school teachers to be more responsive to the changes and need of the students. But they basically produce a mark, and maybe a comment on the report card. And it seems as though most of society has accepted that (approach to student assessment). It is then interpreted as a case in which kids have not learned to read in grade one or two and that we have continued to let them “pass” without teaching them to read. Something like that, right? This is what I see as happening. And I also see that for us in elementary school we are often put more under the administrative scrutiny by being told that we have to fix these problems here. It might be that they genuinely believe that when we get them young we can fix these problems before they get older and once they are older, they have to fix them for themselves. On the other hand, you as a parent know that by the time your child is three there are a lot of things that have been done so that ages four, five and six are not going to change that much.

JM: The other thing is that we have those kids at school as teachers for five hours a day for 185 days out of 365. So how much influence do we really have when all is said and done? I like to think that is quite a bit, but the realist in me says, “Not so much.”

JE: This is not quite about assessment, but I read this article for a class and the author talked about how the difference between the child at home and the child at school and it really influenced their opinion about school. For example, take your four year old. What is her day like? Her day is choosing a whole schwack of things that she is interested in and you get to guide her through how to deal with those things in a safe and meaningful way. OK that is her experience here and it is pretty productive. When you think that she is running around

learning like a crazy person sucking information up left, right and center because she gets to wander around and find interesting things and then explore them and you get to keep her from lopping her fingers off. What happens when she gets to school? In kindergarten she does get some of that exploration. She does get learning centers and dress up and she can decide to dress up as the mom or the worker man. “Would you like to,” is a key question posed to her. But what happens in grade one? That gravy train is done. It is no longer, “What would you like to do?” It is now, “Open your book and we are going to study elephants.”, “I do not want to study elephants.”, “No, we are studying elephants.”.

It seems very innocuous at the beginning, but by the time we get them at grade eight it is insidious the fact these kids have shut down on so many subjects... “I don’t like this, I do not like that...” It is fascinating to me to see these kids. I am a huge fan of choice. I’ll frequently ask my students, “What do you guys want to do?” And I get this look that indicates that they have no idea what that means. The thing that makes the impact in assessment is that they do not want to learn. They have stopped really wanting to learn or reflecting on what they have learned. You can take them to camp and give them those types of experiences and they have probably learned ten times more there they have anywhere else, and again there is no data and there is no way that fits into any curriculum. “How did you find the experience of group work?” You cannot assess that because everyone has a different experience.

JM: So then my question about all of that is, do you find that your assessment strategies serve to motivate your students to want to learn? Whatever you do in a class, or could ideally do in a class, do you think assessment can play a role in motivating kids?

JE: It definitely can motivate kids. But the question is, does it motivate them to action or to learning? Honestly I find that it motivates them to movement. You know the stereotypical scene where the guys are standing around leaning on their shovels chatting? Then the boss pulls up in the truck and that suddenly becomes movement. We have the kids with their books and their hands up in the air and because I am getting a mark I had better do something. Like you said, they will have the jot notes and other items written down but have they internalized and processed and done something with that so that it becomes a meaningful fact.

We can collect data from an experience but is that something that will mean something in two days from now let alone a year from now? This whole notion of becoming a good citizen. When I first started I worked with a teacher and I was grouping my students into four groups, and he packaged and described how he ran his classroom because he constantly had students coming back to say that they learned so much about fairness, group work. Those were the lessons those kids walked away with. I find it interesting because I have often thought of assessment as “that duty.” To collect data based on an assignment you have given in the hopes that students will use the information to improve in the future is the goal. But is that really the most meaningful thing that is happening there? Because I’ll bet it is probably not the most meaningful learning that is going on. But that doesn’t fit into the curriculum either, right?

JM: Maybe the adaptive dimension somewhat.

JE: Are there any other pressing ideas you want to discuss from this list?

JM: There is nothing with any more priority over any list item.

JE: This one, do feel that society believes that school serves to rank and order students? Well, the post-Marxists would say absolutely. The whole ranking and ordering, the grade twelve marks, which college can you get into? Which profession can you have based on how well you play a game. Think about teachers. Who are becoming the directors of education, who are becoming superintendents? How does that process work? Do you think that works based on some sort of genuine assessment of skills and abilities? There is probably golf in there. It probably has ten percent more significance than anything else.

JM: I am sure the “Old Boys’ Network” plays a significant role.

JE: It does not have to be limited to sexism. I read an article that stated golf plays as big a role in your future success as anything. Height, facial features...

JM: Yes, the symmetry of your face...

JE: Those things play a huge role as does your oral communication skills. But schools fall into that whole means of ordering students. They have found that even male CEOs find that success in school is a poor indicator of success in life after school. Whereas for females, success in school has the opposite effect. Some people would identify grade one and grade two as significant for that because they would identify themselves as not fitting into that paradigm. They would not identify with the girls stories or they do not fit into the importance of what that teacher is assessing. They are not fitting that mold so there is a completely different experience for guys. I vividly remember that feeling. I can remember as a young boy feeling like this was not the place for me. It was not until much later, in high school, that I started to think that I could do this. I had all of these male teachers around to connect with. I was probably the first male teacher for at least half of my students. Have you found that as well?

JM: Yes.

JE: I find that fascinating.

JM: It is pretty remarkable.

JE: It makes a huge impact because I work primarily with female teachers. Except for a few exceptions. But this year, I work closely with a female colleague and she approaches things completely differently than I do. She tends toward seriousness and silence and I try to get the lighter side of things to break some of that ice. We have completely differing points of view. She’ll win some and I’ll win some. It is a very fascinating experience.

End of interview.

Fourth Interview Transcription – SP (June 26, 2008)

JM: You have used formative assessment strategies a fair bit this year?

SP: Yes. I have used many different kinds of assessment strategies.

JM: what subject areas have you used them in?

SP: All subject areas.

JM: When you do that are you involving the students in establishing the assessment criteria?

SP: Yes we have started using a lot of criteria based assessment. Looking at exemplars of past student work, we (teachers) have even had to make some exemplars because this is the first year of using criteria based assessment. We have then used those samples to talk about what is a good piece of work and what is terrible, those kinds of things depending on the activity.

JM: How time consuming do you find that?

SP: Very time consuming. (Chuckles) I wish I had days to be able to do that, but we don't. What we have done this year with everything we have done, so I could reuse them, I have asked to keep student work or I have copied student work.

JM: Right.

SP: So I have a lot of exemplars. What I plan to do next year or two years from now is to use those samples and have the students come up with more criteria during class using the old student samples. But I have not had a chance to use old student work because I have not kept it.

JM: [Storage] space is a real consideration.

SP: Yes space and a lot of these things tend to be huge. For example, I have these huge rolls of paper for one particular assignment that are going to be difficult to save.

JM: When you do those big projects using poster boards it becomes a real problem.

SP: Yes. This year when we did our Culture fair I used past boards that students did not want to keep. We used these to establish our assessment criteria and to discuss what students in the past did well and what they could have done better. This year the products from the students were out of this world. They worked really hard to make sure that there were borders, there were colour pictures, and ultimately how they could score better marks.

JM: Right.

SP: My main motto is “Go above and beyond.” How can you [the students] take this to above and beyond? 110% rather than just what you need to get an 80% or a 70%.

JM: do you find that even though you are using these assessment criteria that are designed for improving their learning that kids are still motivated by a mark or summative evaluation?

SP: Yes. They always want to see a mark. I think that is engrained in their being. Especially when we, in the senior end, (grades six through eight) start using class averages. And as soon as you start using class averages, then kids worry about the percentages. I tried this year something different. I wasn’t giving them a percent. I was giving them a comment that matched their report card. For example, I would state that they were “meeting expectations,” or “exceeding expectations,” or “beginning to meet expectations.” That was the only mark they would see on many assignments. The kids would always ask, “What is my mark?” I would tell them that they were meeting the criteria we have set, or not. You have done everything required to meet the criteria we set out. They still ask, “But is that an 80%, or what?” We have even discussed that “exceeding” would place them between high eighties and one hundred [percent]. They still wanted to know, “what did I get?”

JM: Laughing. You did what you needed to do.

SP: Yes. You did exactly what you needed to do. You are meeting everyone’s expectations. I then ask the students what could you have done differently to make it to exceeding. We talk about that a lot. We ask, “What could you have done differently.” Or, halfway through a project or, assignment, I’ll say stop and then we will do a walk by - especially with these giant projects. We will look at some of the things that the other kids in the class have been doing. We then discuss if they have gotten any ideas or how they can take their projects further. Even though it was an assessment from their brain, I wanted to see if it would spur on other ideas they could use. That helped take it even further, and then they really had lots of ideas to work with. I found that very helpful.

JM: Do you find that when you do that sort of thing that kids are communicating their ideas and what they are trying to achieve, with one another?

SP: Yes.

JM: So then, that type of dialogue is starting to increase?

SP: The dialogue increases, and they are giving each other ideas. If they have the opportunity to sit down in groups they are on task. They may be noisy at their tables, but when you go up there and listen to them talk, you will hear, “why don’t you try this,” or “you could make this better if you did that.” I find that during math, when we are working in class, I have discovered over the last number of years, they want to talk about their math. They want it to be this challenge about solving the puzzle. They ask one another, “how did you get that?” or “what did you do?” or “what strategies did you use?” They are actually talking about it (the subject currently being studied).

JM: It is pretty remarkable that if you give them that chance to talk and share and to explore their ideas that they actually will.

SP: They do. You will have the usual suspects that will want to talk about the weekend. But, generally, they do.

JM: I don't think that teachers or anybody else are any different. We have lots of time on task, but we also have periods of time when we are not on task. You can pick out the people at a staff meeting, right?

SP: Oh, for sure. Or at any lit for life conference. (Chuckles)

JM: Have you have run into any feedback from parents? Good, bad or indifferent about this type of alternative assessment strategy? And I am only using the term "alternative" because it is seems to be different from what we have all grown up with, right?

SP: Nobody has come to me and talked about my use of report card comments instead of marks. I have, however, had parents come to me about the different kinds of assessment I am trying that are not formal test type assessments.

JM: Right.

SP: They are generally thrilled to see what kinds of things their kids are producing. The parents will say things like, "I have seen them working on this at home and he won't stop." They seem to see it as taking it further and it is more beneficial than a test. However, I have done both. I want them to see the tests, of course. Because when they get into high school you still have to write final exams. But the learning I have seen in these kids and what I can pull from their brains is far beyond a multiple choice or true and false question and even an essay question. It is unbelievable.

JM: Have you been doing lots of conferencing individually with kids?

SP: Not very much. There are just too many kids. I honestly do not know when I would find the time. And then to try to keep some of these "personalities" on task at the same time when you are trying to do conferencing. When I did that "Keepers" project, which was a giant roll of paper with body shapes drawn on it, and they had a variety of tasks to accomplish, they worked in the hallways all over the school. I have never in my life seen any activity during which kids were as on task as they were during that project.

JM: That's cool.

SP: My principal would walk by with a kid from our behaviour classroom and be able to point out how well the grade eight students were working. The kid would ask why they were so quiet, and he could not get over how well they were working in the hallway. But everyone was so into the project, and it worked for the creative kid and it also worked for the kid that needed to really write a lot. I would do that project again in a second.

JM: Did the assessment drive the project or did the project dictate the assessment?

SP: I used it solely as an assessment. I had never done this project before and it came to me from a “Literacy for Life” conference. I wanted to see if the kids could go beyond just a simple description of a character from the novel (phone rings).

SP: It worked very well and I will probably incorporate something like that for all of my themes that I teach in language arts. They seem to work very well for all learning styles.

JM: Do you find that formative assessment strategies and student involved strategies allows you to be more creative?

SP: Very much. It is much more fun.

JM: Yeah?

SP: That is what I like to do. I cannot stand to mark tests. I would rather stand in the hallway and look at this giant body shape on the wall that we have done for this assessment than mark tests.

JM: Yeah, that...

SP: It is so brutal, it is so dry, it's (sighs). I don't honestly think that we are getting anything out of tests except short-term memory.

JM: I agree with that.

SP: Something like this that I have done, they could use the novel, but it was not about taking facts from the novel. They really had to understand the novel in order to take it beyond a simple comprehension activity. Otherwise it would not tell me what they have learned, they would just be stating facts.

JM: Drill and skill and facts are ok if you want to play Jeopardy, I guess.

SP: What is going to sink in? Until they actually become critical thinkers themselves and analyze what is good and what could be better, and what is terrible. Or, pieces of writing. We did a descriptive paragraph on food. The idea was that the kids could not say what their favourite food was. It was to be a guessing game that we would present to the class. Some of the kids would write dull and boring first drafts that did not provide any information. But by the time they were done, and had taken their time and used descriptive language like simile and metaphor, and discussed how to use them, the finished drafts were out of this world. One thing I have really learned this year when we have talked about assessment and evaluation, is breaking everything down into smaller pieces. We tend to assume that students at this age, grade eight, have all of this information and all of this knowledge. And ultimately when you ask them the key question(s) it turns out that they don't have the knowledge. They don't

know. They do not know how to break a research paper into smaller bits, how to write an outline, or how to do concept webs, or anything else. I usually would have said to kids in the past, here is the assignment, go do a research paper, hand it in... This year, I broke everything down into smaller pieces. We did webs and turned them into outlines, we then talked about topic sentences, jot notes. You'd think that by the time they were in grade seven and eight that they would know how to do that they would have a clue. They have no idea how to do that. Even though they have done it for their entire career, they don't have a clue. So we broke everything down into smaller pieces. That is the same for any kind of assessment, break it down into smaller pieces and let's see what is in their brains.

JM: One other participant said that when he has a chance he likes to conference with kids and find out what they are thinking, what he likes to do is to conference about an assignment that they have done but he will take it away from them so that they do not have that crutch to rely on, and he feels that nine times out of ten they do not know anything about it. He said it was this incredible epiphany that caused him to rethink how he approached his assignments and dealing with the kids in showing these various skills. That statement was pretty revealing, in and of itself.

SP: I could give them a test about anything. Then give them the same test a week later and I am willing to bet that they would not have a clue. Whereas, if I talked to them now about this character after doing our "Keepers" project, they could go on forever. That is because we took it to that next level. It is not simply rote memorization.

JM: They have had a chance to internalize the subject.

SP: Yes, internalize it.

JM: Do you find that you are stretching yourself with assessment strategies in subject areas you are more familiar with?

SP: Yes. Very much.

JM: I am getting the sense that you tend to be a little more of a humanities and literature type person.

SP: Yes, language arts, those types of things. I haven't become super creative in math, yet. I suppose that with our new textbooks next year that there may be ways for me to stretch myself with math assessments. For example, we may move from a multiplication test to have the kids model strategies with manipulatives. I think that is [a limitation] of my creativity with it. I could see other teachers who would refuse to do any kind of alternative assessment. It really depends on the person.

JM: Do you still feel that there are a lot of teachers using traditional evaluation and assessment strategies?

SP: I would say lots of pencil and paper tests. The one thing that I did find interesting when we shared our ideas at the lit for conference, everybody in the groups were interested in what each other were doing. That is a quality all teachers share. We all are interested in learning and exploring new areas. These teachers were very interested in my assessment strategies. If anything, it may open up another door for others to ask about different ways of doing things. But it is very easy to fall back on the same old routine because it is easy.

JM: Like you mentioned, when you have thirty or more kids, and eleven or twelve subject are that you are responsible for, how do you find the time?

SP: I don't know? And ultimately, you look at it and say, when you are part way through "what was I thinking? I could have taken the easy route." But I tend to not take the easy route. That would not be very much fun. I often wonder what the kids would think. I have asked them what they are thinking after we have done some of these new assessments what they think. One thing that I do find with all of these new assessments that I have tried is that they all come up to me and ask, "What do you want me to say?" "What do you want me to tell you?"

JM: Laughs

SP: I ask them, "What do you want to tell me, what have you learned?" That is the whole thing with them wanting to know their mark. They are already conditioned to the point where they are looking for me to tell them what to say because you are the one who is marking this and you will be the one giving me my mark.

JM: Do you think that the students and parents, to some extent, view teachers as holders of this specialized knowledge?

SP: I think so. Ha! Specialized knowledge. I like that! (Laughs) I always say to them that if I do not know something, "I do not have a clue. Let's find out." I think that is something that my students appreciate. That I can admit that I am not the be all and end all of the universe. I think that most parents understand that once they get to know me. There are teachers who are like that, though. But I don't ever pretend to know everything because...

JM: They'd sniff you out in a second.

SP: They'd sniff me out in less than a second. But the kids are just hilarious when they ask, "what do you want me to say?"

JM: That sounds like your kids start the year that way, but as the year progressed, they became more independent and more creative and willing to take risks?

SP: That is what it is. It is a willingness to take risks. I say to them, that it is only you and I, so let's take a risk with whatever we are doing, for example, a presentation. We were doing poetry, and I made them sing. They had to make up rounds. We used a Dr. Seuss style poetry. Dr. Seussical poetry. I told them that they had to make up a round and then go up and sing it in front of the class. Every single kid did it. If there wasn't somebody who was done,

then they went up and just sang a song. That was a way to be fair and equal. We were at a point where everyone was comfortable enough with each other to sing in front of the class or to lay around in the hallway to work on these projects and then being confident about what they are going to say. By that point in the year, kids were less likely to ask me, "What should I write?" There are some who are stuck in that mode and they will likely never get out. They are simply trying to please the teacher.

JM: Right. Do you have any formalized assessment courses from university or anything like that?

SP: I wouldn't even remember. That tells you how much it has stuck in my brain.

JM: Without dating yourself, how long have you been teaching?

SP: I just hit ten years, but I have about five years of subbing in that period.

JM: You have ten years experience, though.

SP: Oh, yes.

End of interview.